

melting the frost

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/37808734) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/37808734>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	Dream SMP
Relationships:	Cara CaptainPuffy & Sam Awesamdude , Grayson Purpled & Luke Punz , Eryn Cyberonix & TommyInnit , Eret & TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Ponk DropsByPonk & TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Connor ConnorEatsPants & Charlie Dalglish & Jschlatt , Aimee Aimsey & TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Charlie Dalglish & TommyInnit
Characters:	TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Grayson Purpled (Video Blogging RPF) , Aimee Aimsey (Video Blogging RPF) , Wilbur Soot , Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF) , Hannah Hannahxxrose , Eryn Cyberonix , Charlie Dalglish , Eret (Video Blogging RPF) , Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF) , Luke Punz , Ted Nivison , Hasan Piker , xQc Félix Lengyel , Connor ConnorEatsPants , Beau Beautie_ (Video Blogging RPF) , Jschlatt (Video Blogging RPF) , Cara CaptainPuffy , Sam Awesamdude , Ponk DropsByPonk (Video Blogging RPF)
Additional Tags:	Ice Skating , Alternate Universe - Olympics , TommyInnit Needs a Hug (Video Blogging RPF) , aimsey is the official mom friend , Hannah is a tommyinnit enthusiast , beau is trying I swear :sob: , Protective Eryn Cyberonix , Grayson Purpled & TommyInnit Friendship (Video Blogging RPF) , Grayson Purpled and Luke Punz are Siblings, but not blood - you know how it is , Protective Ponk DropsByPonk (Video Blogging RPF) , hasan and xqc's cafe is just fun for me , I made jacksepticeye and lazerbeam skaters bc I do what I want , love is stored in [eryn voice] tom , He/Him Pronouns for Eret (Video Blogging RPF) , Healing , Emotional Hurt/Comfort , Happy Ending , Sad TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Protective Eret (Video Blogging RPF) , Protective Cara CaptainPuffy , everyone is protective , Protective Sam Awesamdude , can u tell that Connor is my favorite or? , Figure Skater TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , dream isn't the coach smile!!
Language:	English
Series:	Part 3 of from ice to water
Collections:	Completed stories I've read , sbi my beloved , phoenix's mcyt fics <3 , Found family to make me feel something , Wani's sbi hyperfixation of (mostly) super hero fics , Elvie's favourites , thinksmoon's collection of best sbi fics , fanfics that hurt me but i love them (authors should pay for my therapy) , mcyt related , The faves that keep the fanfic blood flowing , ghostobre's finished reads , alexs fav ffs :] (mostly crimeboys and sbi),

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Stats:

Published: 2022-04-05 Words: 20,551 Chapters: 3/3

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by [Drhair76](#)

Summary

Tommy looks down the way that he left frantically, like he's waiting for the man to pop out of the shadows. "I'm not- I should really get to-"

"Do you need some help?" Purpled blurts. Hit the heart. Get to the core. Purpled has Punz, maybe Tommy could have Purpled.

Tommy looks even more startled, if that was possible. "Wh- what?"

or, eight other points of view from the events of Icing Those Hurts, and the one that matters the most.

Notes

HI :D throws this at you <3

also a note: these events are not happening linearly, they're all sort of happening all at once, so we'll skip from, let's say, Hannah's pov of a skate to Purpled's pov of the closing ceremonies, because I just wanted to capture the most IMPORTANT moments that they all notice, not the whole olympics from each of their povs haha, okay that's all <3

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1

**Suppose your mother had thorns
which she hid under baggy dresses
and you were just a child.**

Would that explain the river between you?

...

Eryn remembers when they were young.

They were neighbors- not next door, because the odds wouldn't possibly allow for that- but close enough that when they both met for the first time, it was at a shared town park. It was the middle of winter and they were the only kids crazy enough to be outside in near-freezing temperatures. Eryn, without his parents' permission and Tommy, who Eryn was pretty sure were glad that he gave them more than ten seconds to breathe.

It wasn't snowing, so it was spectacularly easy to see Tommy standing in the middle of a frozen pond- bright blonde hair and loud red coat with his arms out at his sides for balance. He didn't have any skates- just sneakers- but he looked like he didn't care one bit.

"You're gonna fall in!" Eryn remembers yelling- or thinking to himself judgmentally- it was so long ago.

The one thing he *does* remember, very clearly, without a single doubt, was Tommy looking up, locking eyes with him, and grinning like nothing and no one could ever scare him.

That's how Eryn remembers Tommy.

Of course, there are other details- their first time getting skates one Christmas and them both immediately falling into a heap together on the ice, laughing loudly because they had no clue what they were doing; them joining figure skating lessons together, because they only *wanted* to do it together, and wouldn't go unless they could. Everything else in between too: birthdays and school and sleepovers and days where they just skipped everything in order to hang out.

("I'm gonna try that jump," Tommy says and Eryn, sitting on the frozen grass with his arms on his knees, doesn't bother trying to stop him. When Tommy sets his mind on something, you just better hope you're not one of the people in his way, cause it's happening no matter what.

"You're gonna fall in," Eryn says, feeling a vague sense of déjà vu. "I don't think it's thick enough."

"If I fell in," Tommy goes, turning in little revolutions, round and round, "would you come and get me?"

"No way," he huffs. "I'm not dying for you. I'm telling your mom though. She would come get you."

"I'd be frozen solid by then, Eryn." Tommy rolls his eyes. "I'd be dead. A floating ice cube like in those cartoons."

"You're still gonna jump," he says knowingly.

"I'm still gonna jump," Tommy agrees. He's grinning though, and Eryn knows that when Tommy has that look on his face, even the most improbable could happen. He turns, and starts racing around the pond, clumsily building speed like they were taught.

The ice here isn't even, because it isn't upkept like rinks, but Tommy always says that's good. That means they *have* to be very careful- more careful than other figure skaters that just use the rink. Maybe they'll risk falling in, but if they don't, then they'll be smoother than smooth on the flat, clean, ice.

Tommy likes the risk, and Eryn likes Tommy, so he tolerates it.

Eryn watches as Tommy turns into it and then strikes the ice with one hit, jumps up, pulls his arms in and spins once before falling back. He's supposed to catch himself on the way down, but his skate slips out from under him and he goes sprawling. Both of them hold their breath, waiting and waiting, but the ice under Tommy doesn't give.

"Ow. What the fuck." Tommy says, flopping his arms down. "Come help me up, Eryn."

Eryn stands and wobbles over to Tommy. He looks down at his best friend. His stupid, crazy, wild, best friend, who is holding up his hand like he's expecting Eryn to pick him up.

Eryn doesn't. He goes down with him, lays out on the cold ice by his side. This way, if the ice cracks, they'll both be ice cubes together.

Tommy sighs, dropping his arm.

"You looked dumb," Eryn reports.

"Thanks."

"Very uncoordinated."

"Thank you."

"Like a little deer."

Tommy looks at him. "Eryn?"

"Yeah?"

"Shut up."

Tommy looks back up at the gray, cloudless sky and Eryn follows his lead, quieting with a smile.

"I want," Tommy starts suddenly, "to be the best skater in the world. I want people to see me and think, *woah, there's Tom Simons- he's the figure skater who won all those prizes. Golds and Silvers. He's sick.* I want to hear the announcers talk about me like they do Vikk on TV."

"You gotta land your jumps then," Eryn says. "Vikk lands all his jumps."

"I'm gonna learn the stupid jumps," Tommy grumbles. "I'm gonna learn it all- know it by heart- and then I'm going to the Olympics. And you're coming with me."

Eryn looks over. Tommy keeps his eyes on the sky.

Tommy's always seen in pictures too big for Eryn to paint. He sees them being Olympians, but honestly, Eryn can't see beyond their missed jumps and long practices. He can't look past the bruises and aching ankles.

"If you say so," he says, because Tommy's will is strong enough to make it. He sits up, cold now. "You would look shit with a gold medal by the way- your hair is too yellow."

"I'm-" Tommy flushes angrily. "*What?*"

"Silver is better," Eryn says, standing up. He almost falls, but he catches himself and slides away. "For you, anyway. If we're going to the Olympics, it's best if they give the gold to me. I'd look good with it."

"You wouldn't- you *suck*," Tommy says, flustered. He tugs a hand through his hair. He moves to stand, and rises much more gracefully than Eryn did- Eryn chooses to ignore that. "We're gonna be rivals. I just decided. I'm gonna hate your guts when we grow up."

"Uh huh," Eryn steps up onto the bank, turns and reaches out to help Tommy.

"We are!" He continues loudly, taking the hand. His knees wobble a bit when he gets off the ice. "We are. I'm- woah. Woah."

"What? You alright?"

"Shaky." Tommy says suddenly. "Weird."

"Here," Eryn offers. "Hold on to me."

Tommy does immediately. Eryn walks them up the hill. "I still hate your guts, you know."

"Sure."

"You've got some nasty competition coming your way."

"Uh huh."

"It will be so awful and bad- you'll cry. It will be very funny."

"Tommy?"

"Yeah?"

"Shut up.")

...

Eryn, of course, watches all of Tommy's routines.

He has to, he finds. He can't bear to watch the edited versions on television or the little cut up clips online afterwards. None of them are ever the full story. They're always trying to get the best angle, or the prettiest shot. Out by the rink, everything he sees is raw and real- like the ground view of a disaster-zone; something you can't keep your eyes off of. And he *can't*, really. He can't. He needs to see everything that Tommy does, and not just because he's his competition, but also because he was his *friend*.

The jumps that Tommy manages to do, the way he twists himself in the air- it's not *right*. Yeah, maybe it's beautiful, and yeah, maybe it's impressive, but Eryn knows full well the time and practice and hard work that it takes to make it possible to do that. He has to wonder how much of Tommy's time is spent on the rink. Half? All?

Clearly *enough* judging by the near perfect run of his short skate. He ends on one knee, with one perfectly straight arm out like a wave, and holds it until everyone bursts into applause. Eryn doesn't clap. He *can't* clap when he sees Tommy's chest heave once like he's sucking in one huge breath and then he bends over, touching his forehead to the ice.

He doesn't move for a moment, just laying there breathing, and Eryn can see Tommy's coach, who's waiting by the gate, getting agitated.

"Come on Tom," he finds himself whispering. "Come on. Get up, Tom. Please."

Slowly, Tommy lifts his head and pulls himself off the ice. It looks like it takes herculean effort. It probably does too. It's hard, getting up on your own at the end when you're too exhausted to move, but still, Tommy does it.

He skates around, waving at the crowd and then goes over to the gate. From his seat, Eryn can see the way his legs tremble, and he expects the coach to put a hand out to steady Tommy, but no, he just turns away, starting to walk. Tommy probably needs a moment, but he doesn't take it, just following behind carefully.

For some reason, out of everyone, Tommy looks up, looks over, and sees Eryn watching.

They lock eyes.

If I fell in, would you come and get me?

Tommy's gaze drops, so Eryn's does too.

...

Beau doesn't understand Tommy.

No one does, Eryn finds. Maybe not even him.

But Beau...God, Beau *really* doesn't get him.

"I mean, what kind of person doesn't even bother saying hello?" She rants, pacing back and forth, changed out of her skates now, just in trainers and sweats. Aimsey is quiet in the corner, probably tired, holding herself like she wants a hug. "He skates the shit out of a short and then doesn't even offer any sportsman-like congratulations? What a stuck up bitch!"

Eryn's teeth grind. "Beau," he says carefully, "you don't know him, so-"

"No one does, actually," she huffs. "Because he doesn't talk to anyone! He thinks he's better than us all!"

"I know him actually." He says. She stops. "Well, I knew him. Back before-"

"Before what? Before he got famous?" She raises an eyebrow. "Before he left you? Eryn, I get it if you still like him or whatever, but you're my friend and seeing you so careful about someone who doesn't care about you- someone who left you- I can't-"

Eryn's fists curl into balls at his sides. His chest burns. "Beau!" He snaps. She finally quiets. "He didn't fucking leave me. I left him. I'm the one who left him behind." His vision blurs, and he suddenly can't look Beau in the face anymore- too ashamed. "He's- he's alone now. He's alone and he has no one and it's all because of me."

Beau doesn't have anything to say to that, stunned. Aimsey hugs herself tighter. Eryn swipes at his face and wishes he was twelve again.

...

Something about the final free skate feels *different*.

Eryn watches it with an almost overwhelming sense of relief, for one. *There he is*, he thinks. *There's Tommy*. There's Eryn's best friend. He's still here, despite it all. He's still fighting.

It's so beautiful to watch him land his jumps with a smile, watch him throw his hands out with a self assured flourish, turn his sparkling eyes to the judges and the cheering audience- it's all that Eryn imagined the Olympics would be for Tommy. He's so grateful to be able to see that dream become a reality.

When Tommy finishes, he doesn't put his head down or look like he needs a moment to breathe- which is great, because the Tommy that Eryn used to know had reserves and reserves of energy stored away. He'd be able to practice and practice and still laugh loudly after it, like working only gave him more strength. Watching him step off the ice looking

drained made Eryn feel like the world was tilted sideways. But now it looks like he's gaining all of that back. He's getting back just a little of his color.

If Tommy feels that good after a performance, then it wasn't even work for him- just fun. And that's what Eryn wants.

He skates off, and the second he's at the edge of the rink, he's being swept into the arms of a huddle of hockey players- one of which lifts Tommy up onto his shoulders, like he's scored the winning goal in their match. He doesn't have to worry about coming off the ice on shaking legs without someone to steady him, because they're all there. They're all around him, celebrating his success.

Easy win, Eryn thinks, and he's not even upset about gold slipping through his fingers before he has the chance to skate. Tommy deserved it. At the next Olympics, Eryn is coming for him, just like Tommy said. He'll settle for being rivals on the ice. If Tommy is happy, then that's what they'll be.

...

Tommy, to the relief of probably everyone at the rink, doesn't have a coach, so he sits up on that box alone, back perfectly straight, hands pressed tight between his knees as he awaits his score.

Eryn knows he's nervous, but his coach isn't leaning over him, grabbing his shoulder and talking into his ear, so he knows that he'll be alright. When the score comes up, Tommy is so shocked that he visibly slackens. It's like all the tension that's been holding him up and stringing him out releases all at once, and he looks so relieved that he might just cry right there.

Gold medal in figure skating- briefly Eryn wonders if it feels as good as it looks. Then he sees Tommy looking through the crowd for the gaggle of hockey players, who are all making a huge ruckus despite definitely not understanding the way figure skating scores are weighted, and he can imagine that maybe, to Tommy, gold isn't the part that feels so good.

He finally has someone at his back, and it settles Eryn enough to know that at least Wilbur would never leave Tommy to go through anything like this ever again. None of them, from the sound of their dedicated cheers, would.

If Tommy fell in, they would go get him- no matter what.

After all the flowers and Eryn's own routine and him getting his score, he lingers behind, half watching Aimsey skate and half watching Tommy sit in the seats. Tommy's settled himself in the middle of all those clumsy hockey players, indulging and fulfilling their need for his attention. He looks utterly comfortable, the most that Eryn's seen him in years, smiling when one of them gives him water or carefully lays a hockey jacket over his shoulders.

They're loud enough for Eryn to hear snippets of their conversation, one of them complaining that Tommy couldn't have seen their match, and another one starts trying to explain it in these explosive, indecipherable terms, and Tommy is just listening with a shining expression.

"We can watch the film later," the older, blond one says- he's got a jacket on that designates him as a coach, so it's no wonder that they quiet down after hearing that. "Hush now."

They fall relatively quiet, and Eryn tries not to stare at the way that Tommy's eyes twinkle from just being around them.

...

Eryn catches Tommy just as they're all about to leave in one loud group. It's funny- one of them is holding Tommy's skates, and another, his sweater, and they walk around him like his own personal protection squad.

Eryn feels almost like he's intruding when he follows them out and stops them, wanting to catch Tommy before he leaves.

"Hey," he says. "Tommy, can we talk?"

It's an interesting dynamic to watch unfold right in front of him, because one of them- the one with wavy curls, facial hair and a snapback, steps forward like Eryn is some type of threat, but Wilbur, who knows Eryn, stops him. Eryn figures that he's gonna have to learn all of these hockey players names if he's gonna keep being friends with Tommy- or start again, at least.

"Yeah," Tommy says softly, a bit nervous. "Yeah, I'm- yeah." He turns to the players and the coach, who are watching him carefully. "I'll catch up with you."

"Alright, Tommy." Wilbur pointedly tugs the hat-wearing player's arm. "We'll be outside by the bus."

They all file out, with the hat-guy giving Tommy one final ruffle of the hair and giving Eryn a *look* before they're both alone. There's a quiet, loaded pause. Eryn suddenly realizes he has no clue how to start this conversation.

"They seem nice." He notes awkwardly, and that must have been the right move because Tommy huffs, smiling, not quite a laugh, but almost.

"They are." He says genuinely. "They're a bit- protective, I guess."

"Good." Eryn says, unable to stop himself. Tommy blinks, confused. And now he has to explain himself. God. "I mean- I just- you deserve to have people like that. Everyone does, but I think you do more than most."

Tommy is quiet. Another loaded pause.

"Congrats." He blurts. "On gold. I mean, we all saw it coming but--"

"I didn't," Tommy breathes, his hand creeping up to trace along the outer edges of the medal sitting on his chest. "Thought I'd die before I got here."

Eryn can't laugh at that the way he wants to. He can't not see every bit of Tommy's exhaustion as painfully real. He thinks that Tommy, for all the prizes and gold and expertise, will have a long, long road ahead of him. Healing- something you don't get medals for.

"I'm glad you didn't." Eryn says, feeling cut open. "I- I missed you, man."

A couple of expressions pass over Tommy's face. Confusion, consideration, apprehension, and then he seems to give all of that up, just looking tired all over again. "Me too." He says finally. "You skated well. We should- I don't know- we should skate together one time. If you wanted. If you weren't busy."

"Yeah," Eryn can't help the way he sounds. Relieved. He turns to the door, walking by Tommy's side. No doubt that the hockey players will be getting antsy, thinking that Eryn will Tonya Harding Tommy right here in the open if they don't see him in the next ten seconds. "We should. I'd like that. And hey, next Olympics, you're not gonna know what hit you on the ice, that I can promise."

"Hm?"

"I'm gonna come up outta nowhere, I mean it. Knock you on your ass on the ice."

Tommy makes a face- hesitant teasing. "Sure."

"That gold will be mine," he says, at this point he's just talking nonsense but God, it feels so good to talk to Tommy again. Eryn feels like he's just gotten his leg untied after it being wrapped for years. "So enjoy it while you can."

"Eryn?" Tommy goes, stopping short. Eryn stops too, turning to look at him, all of a sudden apprehensive.

"Yeah?" He questions, nervous. Did he go too far? Are they not-

"Shut up." Tommy says, then keeps walking, leaving Eryn to follow behind, giddy.

Eryn doesn't think he's ever been so glad to be told to shut up in his life.

Hannah's first impression of Tommy was through the television- which is never entirely reliable, but what can you do about that?

He was skating smaller time then, and she was drawn to the immense joy that he moved with. It's like he skated with his heart and not just his head like most people do. And that stood out to her because that's the one thing a coach can't teach.

You can teach a skater the moves, but you can't make them love the sport.

He shot across the ice, almost too fast for the camera to catch him, like he was running away from it. When he launched into his first jump, he landed it with a *laugh* and Hannah knew he would be a force to be reckoned with. If he kept skating like that- with a wild sort of love, like flight- then no one, with any type of training, would be able to touch him.

Of course, that intensity needed to be tamed, just enough so he knew how to harness it instead of letting it blindly drive him, but at the time, seeing that beauty, she thought: *anything is possible*. With the right coach, he would shoot up to the stars and never come back down.

...

Then Hannah's student became an Olympian.

...

Beau is not your average female figure skater.

She's not delicate, or graceful, or sweet. Honestly, she's mean, she's loud, she isn't afraid to say what she really thinks about anyone that she feels deserves it.

Hannah was like that a long, long time ago. In the beginning of her career, she was a spitfire and she didn't take any shit, especially from someone she didn't like. But as the years went by, time in front of the globe on the ice sanded her down. She had to learn what battles to fight and which ones to let blow over her. She had to learn to smile at things that she wasn't allowed to snap at.

(It's the same still- even as a coach.)

When she first met Tommy's coach, she was immediately put off. And it wasn't just because he looked down at her like it was his job- no. That was something she was used to; she's a woman. But it was the fact that Tommy, television and camera sweetheart, was trailing behind him, looking jittery and nervous and *small*, that gave her pause.

"Hello," she greeted, trying to be *nice*. "Nice to meet you."

He hardly reacted. Glancing her over, judging. "Hm."

"I'm Hannah," she tried. "I'm Beau's figure skating coach- and you must be Tommy. I think that Beau's changing right now but I know that she's very excited to skate against you."

Tommy, weirdly, opened his mouth, then closed it, then looked over at his coach. "I am too." He said slowly. "It should be- fun."

He sounded as if he was measuring every word he said. As if he was making sure they're all acceptable. That *he's* acceptable.

She laughed anyway. A bit of her press laugh, but she wanted Tommy to relax a little. She wasn't biting. No one here was. "Events always are. Especially on such a big stage. Are you nervous at all?"

"Is there a particular reason you want to talk to my skater, coach Hannah?" Tommy's coach said suddenly, leveling a dirty look at her when he hadn't given her the courtesy of his full gaze since she walked up.

Hannah's lips pursed. Her smile strained. "Just being friendly." It's a bit stilted, but could she really be blamed? This guy, to put it nicely, was a right dick.

Tommy, again, looked at his coach. Apprehensive, knowing. Wincing at something in particular. Hannah made a mistake somewhere in there, and it would be unforgivable.

"We are not *friends*, coach Hannah." He said, slowly, carefully, firmly. "We are opponents. We are skating against each other to win. If you truly want gold, then I'd suggest that you take it seriously. There are no friends at the Olympics."

Ah. There. That was her mistake. Friends. Well.

She lifted her nose. She loved a good challenge. "The figure skaters of old knew that *healthy* competition was the best motivator. Lazer and Vikk and Miniminter. Jacksepticeye and Markiplier. Need I go on?"

The coach tensed and Tommy seemed to shrink next to him. "If competition is healthy then it isn't competition. I'm truly sorry coach Hannah, but if this is the way that you see winning, then I for one, have no idea how you and your student made it to the Olympics."

Hannah balked, and she *wanted* to open her mouth and say everything that was on her mind- awful and explicit and everything in between- but she was supposed to be controlled. Besides, if this guy goes squealing to the officials about how Hannah called him a walking dickwad that shops at the men's wearhouse as a pastime, then she'd get removed from the Olympics. And that was simply not fair to Beau, who had been learning, albeit painfully, how to hold her tongue about things.

"Now, if you'll excuse us- we have practice times to schedule." He brushed by. "Come on, Tommy."

Tommy paused before he followed. He ducked his head down, almost like he was bowing, and whispered, so low, sounding afraid to be overheard. "Sorry coach Hannah."

She softened. How could she not? Tommy wasn't the one who did any wrong. "It's okay, kid. You're fine, I promise."

Tommy hesitated for just a second before nodding jerkily and rushing off.

And that was her first ever interaction with them both. The coach, a professional douche, and Tommy, not a single bit the glowing smiling joyful force that Hannah was expecting.

It was weird. It was infuriating. But more than that, it was *confusing*.

...

Hannah watches the short programs- Eryn does amazing, as he always does on shorter routines. He doesn't have the best stamina, and when he gets to longer programs and gets tired during the second half, he starts to mess up during certain things- leaning a little too far to one side, not pulling his arms in tight enough when he spins. Just the little things.

Unfortunately, it's the little things that matter.

Beau does beautifully; getting all in the green points for her artistic interpretation of the music. Of course, there's one jump she takes a spill on, the dreaded triple axle, but when she comes off the ice, Hannah is more than proud of her for being brave enough to attempt it.

Aimsey does well. From the little that Hannah has seen her skate, she can tell that jumping is not the girl's strong suit, but no one can beat her out for a clean step routine- she glides over the ice like she's on a cloud, without a single screech of a skate to be heard. It's satisfying beyond anything.

And then there's Tommy.

This, like many other people in the arena, is who Hannah has been waiting to see. She just needs to see him skate; she needs to see if the wild untamable love for flight is still there as he performs. She *needs* to see it in person, she finds. There's a lot that this sport has taken from her, and maybe- just maybe- seeing someone young and untouched by it would give her some of that back.

She watches him skate out, dressed in flowy icy blues. He does precisely one circle before stopping in his starting position. Hannah leans in slightly.

The music starts, and he goes.

Every movement is precise and technically perfect, from the jumps, to the spins to the step sequences. There isn't a field of the program that he seems to falter in, no weakness to be seen. Everything is *perfect*.

Except, when he stops skating, Hannah still feels empty. Except, when he stops skating, he isn't smiling. Except, when he stops skating and everyone around is breaking into cheers, Hannah's eyes gravitate to Tommy's coach and to the disapproving *frown* on his features.

And she knows that Tommy's seen it, because he breathes heavily, unsteadily once, and turns abruptly to wave at the stands.

Hannah feels *sick*.

The blazingly brilliant boy she saw just two years ago is almost completely iced over-washed out. He's a gold medal robot; technically, frostily perfect. And still met with disapproval.

She dreads having to watch his free skate. Absolutely dreads it.

...

"The ice is so pretty before anyone skates on it." Aimsey notes.

They're all sitting by the rink edge, waiting for their cue that the ice is good for them to skate on for practice. Beau keeps pacing back and forth, far too much energy inside of her that needs to be let out. She, Hannah knows well, hates the waiting in between the skates. She'd

go first every time if she could, because having to wait through everyone else's routines before her own always puts her further and further on edge.

"It is, that's true." Hannah nods.

"It'd be prettier if we were on it." Beau huffs, and Hannah tsks disapprovingly.

"Take a deep breath," she orders. Beau makes a face, but she stops pacing and inhales, pauses, then exhales.

Out of the corner of Hannah's eye, leaning against the back wall, she can see Eryn do the same thing. She internally rolls her eyes at Boomer for disregarding his pupils' nerves in order to get him waters. How irresponsible.

"You're all going to do great," she says, quite loudly, maybe not loud enough, but Eryn glances over, so Hannah thinks her message was received. "All of you," she adds, unable to help but glance around, looking for Tommy, who hasn't shown up yet.

"You're looking for Simons, aren't you?" Beau asks, leaning heavily at her side in a way that would be annoying if Hannah wasn't fond and wasn't used to it by now.

"Is it that obvious?"

"Everyone here is looking for him apparently- even hockey players." She remarks. Then Aimsey shifts uncomfortably and Hannah realizes that *maybe* these skaters know a bit more about Tommy's... *situation* than they're letting on.

"What do you mean?"

"She means that Tom has gone and gotten himself a group of hockey players and we're hoping they'll smash the shit out of his coach." Eryn says suddenly, pulling away from the wall and coming over to Beau's side. Beau kicks him with the side of her skate and Eryn flicks her arm.

Tom?

Amisey leans over to them all. "They might have already- I think something happened by the cafe. Did you hear? I'm pretty sure the coach tried to attack one of them so they knocked him out."

Beau whistles lowly, lips twitching upwards. "That's what he gets for trying to pick a fight with a hockey player. Those guys can scrap."

"I'm just happy that they got to him before I had to- that man was pissing me the fuck off." Eryn says, not even *trying* to hide his delighted grin.

Hannah, quietly, mainly to herself, goes, "yeah. Me too."

They wait just a little longer, and then Tommy actually shows up, and just as they thought, there's no coach with him, just his skates and his jacket.

He looks- better.

Hannah actually didn't even notice how tired he always seemed until just now, because now he's got the absolutely smallest, content smile and he looks so much more well rested- as if he got a full night's rest and woke up excited to skate this morning.

Hannah decides to take a chance. She's not his coach, but everyone appreciates an encouraging word. "Good luck today, Tommy!"

Tommy looks up. Out of instinct, he glances around him, as if looking for his coach, but then he relaxes, not seeing him- remembering that he's by himself. "Thank you," he calls softly. "And- uh- good luck to you guys too."

Aimsey beams, bouncing once on her skates. "I can't wait to see how you put us all to shame again today!"

Tommy ducks his head, bashful. "Thank you, Aimsey."

Truthfully, Hannah can't wait either- especially if what she's heard is true. If his coach is gone, maybe she'll get to see that light as air, bright as the sun, passionate skater that she saw all those months ago.

Maybe, she hopes, this could be where everything starts mending.

Aimsey gets told a lot that she's just too *short* for figure skating.

Too short and too nice. Which, she can guess how the first one would matter- shorter people have less limb to balance with, which just makes her job two times harder- but being too nice? How could someone ever be too nice?

Aimsey is of the opinion that people are not nice enough, actually.

When she found out that she qualified for the Olympics, she immediately went and watched all the videos she could find of all the other people she'd be skating against. Eryn, Tommy, Beau.

The first thing she realizes is that they're all *young*. Not a single one of them are over eighteen, and while Aimsey is only twenty, she still feels like that's a very significant difference.

They're practically *babies* going up into the world of competition. They're going to be thrust up into the spotlight and scrutinized and judged and they're just children.

Aimsey, who's done a couple of world competitions, both junior and senior, knows how terrifying that can be.

Thankfully, Aimsey had Snifferish alongside her to go through all the confusing and terrifying parts, but these guys- they don't know what they're getting into. They don't know how much they'll *need* each other during this.

I've got this, Aimsey thinks. I'll lead them though. How hard could it be?

...

Making friends with Beau is easy enough- the girl is very noticeable, so Aimsey knows her immediately when she walks into the arena, with dangling earrings and a face full of black makeup.

"Hello!" she greets, "nice to meet you, I'm Aimsey. I think we met during the qualifications!"

"Hi" Beau says, shifting a little. "I'm Beau." She looks up and around. "This is- "

"Cool."

"Big," she finishes. "Everything here is so huge."

"A bit scary, isn't it?"

Beau nods.

Aimsey hums- she was scared too, her first competition. Her hands wouldn't stop shaking and everything was drawing her attention; she couldn't focus. But then she got onto the ice and all of that faded. She remembered why she was there, and what she was supposed to do. All the noise disappeared.

She looks over at Beau, getting an idea. "Hey, come with me," she steps back, grinning a little.

"What? What are you-"

"Do you have your skates?"

Beau nods and Aimsey reaches forward and grabs her hand. "Okay, okay then, don't you want to try out the ice? It's pretty but it would look even prettier with us on it, yeah?"

Beau doesn't really have much of a choice, with the way Aimsey drags her along, but it's fun. Aimsey tries a triple axle, stumbles and laughs, and Beau tries one too, sticks it and cheers. They skate until Beau isn't jittery anymore, and Aimsey is breathless with joy.

"The ice is always the ice," Aimsey says, watching Beau curve in a loose circle, who's no longer looking up at the rink around them in fear. "No matter how big everything else is, you've always got that."

Beau beams at her.

And that's how they became friends.

...

Aimsey meets Eryn because *Beau* meets Bryn. Apparently, when Beau meets people she likes, she decides that they are never allowed to leave.

She's just having breakfast when Beau comes over, loudly proclaims that she picked up a stray, and Eryn sits down next to them awkwardly.

"I'm Eryn. Beau wouldn't leave me alone, so now I'm here."

Aimsey laughs and nudges her plate over at him. the tension eases out from his shoulders. "Nice to meet you, Eryn, have a bagel."

...

Tommy drifts on the edge of Aimsey's vision.

She sees him, and sees him alone, and her heart hurts. But it's almost as if there's a bubble around him- some kind of frost that's keeping people away.

"That's Tommy," Beau says once, as they're all sipping smoothies, just people watching by the cafe. Tommy drifts by with skates and a bag and a blank expression. "He's the favorite. Everyone says he's gonna cinch gold."

"There's always one," she sighs. "I guess we won't be able to tell until we all get to skate."

"Fuck yeah," Beau pokes her strawberry smoothie with a black straw harshly. "No stuck up little ice prince is gonna take a medal from me before we even compete."

Aimsey feels a bit uncomfortable talking about someone when they're not around to defend themselves- especially one that carries themselves like they've only ever known loneliness- but she hums to show that she's listening.

It doesn't, however, escape her notice that Eryn just stays quiet.

...

Aimsey sort of blacks out when she skates her short.

She skates out in front of the crowds, gets ready, and then when she opens her eyes again, everyone is cheering and she's breathless.

She doesn't worry about it; she smiles and skates off into the arms of her coach. She gets her score- not as good as she was hoping, but that's alright- and she sits down to watch the others. Beau and Eryn do beautifully; with them each getting a nice hug after their skaters and a supportive presence as they wait for their scores.

And then Tommy.

Watching him, Aimsey can understand why he's the favorite.

The only way that Aimsey can think to describe his skating is like when you order a waffle cone on the pier and you can see into the window as the person is putting the soft serve in. The machine goes on, and the ice cream begins to come out and you can see the way that the person catches it all, the way that they rotate the cone in a slow circle. It's mesmerizing, seeing the way that it layers in that swirl. When you finally get the cone, you almost don't want to touch it; you're upset that you're going to destroy something that seems meant to be preserved perfectly.

That's what Tommy's skating is like: a perfect preservation. A snapshot of an ideal. Aimsey is stunned in the face of it.

He gives himself a moment to breathe, and then completes the end routine rituals, moving towards the gate. For some reason, Aimsey can't look away as he fits on his skate guards.

Every movement is precise and practiced, wasting zero time. And then he looks up at his coach, and in the space where Aimsey would've launched herself forward, he just waits. The coach regards him, then turns and walks away.

Oh, Aimsey thinks. *Oh*.

The swirls are perfect, but there is something rotten at the core. Something at the base is cracked and crumbling.

Tommy didn't get his hug, and that's when Aimsey realizes that there is something *seriously* wrong with all of that perfection.

"God, he's good," Beau whispers under her breath. Aimsey nods numbly.

"Too good," she says to herself. *Too alone*, she thinks.

...

"Hey," Aimsey says, taking a chance, and Tommy turns to look at her.

The reporters have left, and the coaches are being interviewed now, so it's just them. Just the two of them, with Beau popping back into the arena to collect some bears and Eryn forgetting his jacket at his seat.

"I'm Aimsey," she continues, because he doesn't speak. "I mean, you probably already know that- you heard the announcers say it but- it's nice to meet you."

"It's nice to meet you too," he whispers, gaze flickering over Aimsey's shoulder at the door. "Your skate was beautiful."

"So was yours!" She grins. "You're amazing, Tommy." He ducks his head, and Aimsey has a feeling he won't hear this anywhere else- that he's not used to hearing it anywhere else- so she keeps going. "No really, I was watching and I was floored. You're- you're an artist."

Tommy looks startled to hear that. "Oh. I'm- I'm not. Not really, I just-"

“You just skate like a painting,” she finishes pointedly. “You’re marvelous.”

Tommy turns bright red. “Thank you. That- that means a lot, thank you.”

Aimsey nods once, and then, impulsive, she reaches out and pulls Tommy into a hug. He tenses up all over, inhaling sharply in her ear, but Aimsey merely holds him tighter, not letting him go. Slowly but surely, she feels him relax, and his arms creep up to carefully hold her back. She hears his breath catch, and then his arms tighten, not painfully, but just enough that Aimsey would describe the feeling as desperate. This is needed.

Well, if that’s the case, then Aimsey will stand here and hug him for the rest of the event.

Unfortunately, there’s a thump from outside of the door and Tommy lets go and jumps backwards like if he’s caught hugging someone he’ll be flayed alive. The next person to walk in is Tommy’s coach, so Aimsey’s not so sure that she isn’t at least a little bit right.

The coach looks between the two, casting a suspicious, distrustful look over Tommy, who’s gaze is now fixed on his shoes. From her, Aimsey can see the way his hands tremble.

“Let’s go Tommy,” he demands, walking out without waiting. Tommy hurries to follow, the both of them nearly knocking right into Beau walking in.

“What the hell was that about?” Beau frowns.

Aimsey can only shrug, the feeling of Tommy’s desperate hold still around her, like a ghost she can’t banish.

...

Later, Aimsey will learn-

I wasn't allowed friends, he'd say, sitting on the seats outside of the ice rink. They do this now- hanging out, talking, all of them; with Eryn and Beau still chasing each other around on the ice. They were distracting, so I never- I just- I don't know. I let people think whatever they thought. I couldn't blame Beau for any of that. I had to stay distant.

Aimsey frowns; she remembers when Beau apologized to Tommy for thinking all that she thought about him. He didn't seem surprised in the slightest- now Aimsey knows why. *Well, she says slowly. Now you've got us, and they're gonna have to do some real shit to take us away.*

Yeah?

Yep! You've got us, Tommy. We're always gonna be here for you.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

"Alright!" he says anyway, with a relaxed smile on his face. "Is there anything that I can help you with, then? Are you hurt or is there something bothering you?"

Tommy folds his hands together in front of him. "No," he says, so quickly it must be instinctual, then he winces. "I mean, yes. I- I think?"

"Okay," Ponk says patiently. "Take your time, Tommy. I'm in no rush."

Chapter Notes

small reminder that I'm not a figure skater :sob: I've done a lot of research but idk if everything is accurate, please be gentle haha

Suppose during your birthday toast

there was a goldfish in your wine glass.

Would it be auspicious or foreboding?

Puffy stares at Tommy's skate program when she gets it.

Before any of the skates, the network announcers are given a copy of the planned routine for all the skaters- it's just in case they miss something from watching so far away, so they know what they're supposed to be on the lookout for as they watch. For all skates, there are certain requirements that must be met; the placement of jumps, and the way that costumes are made, and the elements in every routine. Most skaters do what they know that they can, try to do it to the best of their ability, and hope that their high execution of the tricks give them enough points to pull them through to the top three. So when Puffy and Sam get the programs, they end up seeing a lot of similar moves- things that most skaters can do.

With Tommy's free skate program, Puffy doesn't see any of the things that the other competitors are working on.

Quad flip, triple axle, quad lutz with a triple toe loop combination. And with the combination scheduled in the second half, when he'll already be tired-

“Sam,” Puffy says, and the man turns in his chair to look at her. “Sam, have you seen this program?”

“Here,” he holds out a hand to take it. She gives it and watches him, waiting. She sees the exact moment that he realizes, because his expression goes from passively reading, to confusion, to astonishment.

And, if Puffy knows him as well as she thinks she does, then she can also see the slight traces of horror there too.

“This is-”

“Insane,” Puffy finishes. “It’s insane, right? I’m not- I’m not just overreacting?”

“No, no you aren’t.” Sam squints down at the paper like if he looks hard enough it will change right in front of his eyes. “This is a lot. This is Tommy?” Puffy nods. “God, he’s the young one. He’s the young one.”

“The kid,” Puffy says. For men’s figure skating, Tommy’s so young. He’s the sport’s darling and he’s debuting at his first olympics and he’s got programs that make Puffy’s head spin. “God, are we even sure that he’s human? How could he do all this and not-”

“I don’t know. I don’t know Puff. Honestly, the thing that I want to know is *how* .” Sam tosses the paper down on the table in front of them. “How is this kid so confident to do these moves? What is this kid’s coach doing to get these results?”

God, that’s the last thing that Puffy wants to know. She knows good and well how sometimes things slip behind closed practice doors. She knows the way that everything becomes an act when you get in front of the cameras.

"I don't know, Sam," she whispers. "I just don't know."

...

Tommy's short skate is magnificent. Perfect. Almost zero mistakes.

Wow, Puffy says into the mic, I'm- I'm floored. Truly.

That was technically perfect, Sam remarks, sounding equally as taken-aback. That whole run, I didn't notice a single mistake. What I did notice, you certainly saw too, but the speed with which Tommy skates- the distance on the jumps. The efficiency. Everything is carefully measured and thought about. It's like-

It's like he's able to steal the seconds, Puffy says. Like as he goes up, the world slows, giving him the time to put himself into the perfect positioning, with the most extension.

His grade of execution: always green, Sam notes, as the replay goes in front of them- Tommy, spinning and turning, pulling and posing. Perfection may not exist, but it's certainly approached every time that Tom Simons takes the ice.

Watch this here, Puffy says, watch this step- so smooth. He's like water. You can't teach that fluidity to a skater.

You can't, you can't, this is all Tommy. This emotion and feeling- it's as if he's finally let out of a cage when he's on the ice. As if he saves it all for this moment when he performs.

Puffy nods. She nods and agrees and doles out as many compliments to Tommy as she can, hoping that he'll hear them. She hopes that they get to him somehow- past the noise and the show and the critics.

She hopes he knows that he is the reason for his beautiful skates- no one else.

...

(Tommy does hear her. He does.

Late at night, when he's sure that his coach is asleep, when he's sure that he won't be seen, he'll rewatch the videos of his performance. He keeps his eyes closed, because he knows that if he sees himself skate, he'll only heavily critique it, but he listens.

He closes his eyes and curls up and tries to lose himself in the sound of their voices- Puffy and Sam, who were magnificent skaters that believe he is the future. Every single time he listens, he wishes he could believe it as much as they do.)

...

Puffy, even though she's been doing this job for three years now, still has a jitter of nerves before she has to go out and give any type of interview.

In the box, high up over the ice with a microphone is fine, because it's just her and Sam talking about amazing ice skating the way that they've always done, even back when they were competing, but out here, there's a camera and she's got a job to do.

"Hey," Sam says, reaching out and touching her elbow. "We're gonna do great." He always says that- it's a bit of a ritual- and Puffy always smiles, grateful.

The skaters are already lined up, standing in front of flashing cameras and behind the crowd control stanchions. You wouldn't be able to tell who skated the short skate the best by their expressions, Puffy notes, watching the way that Aimsey beams at the camera and the way that Tommy ducks, expression downcast.

"I'll take the left, you take the right?" Sam whispers. Puffy nods.

She interviews Aimsey first, asking her how she's feeling, how she's feeling about the skate, what was going through her mind as she skated- with every question, Aimsey seems at ease to answer, excited to talk and explain her thought process.

Even if she was a bit bummed about the few missed jumps and down graded elements, she still smiles like she enjoyed it, and that's what Puffy loves to see.

That's what she's thinking about when she steps over to interview Tommy.

"Hello!" she says cheerily, eyes flicking over to the side.

Weirdly enough, unlike all the other skaters, Tommy's coach is just a step away from him, like some kind of watchful parent. Or a guard.

A guard for the prince of ice- Puffy wonders which one of them is being kept behind the tower walls.

"Hello," he says back, polite and quiet.

"What a brilliant skate today, Tommy," she gushes, unable to help herself. "You did positively beautiful out there!"

His head lifts slightly. He looks like he's calculating before he even says a single syllable. "Thank you. I should say: it was all thanks to the hard work and dedication of my coach. I wouldn't be where I am without him."

The coach, leering too close for Puffy's comfort, smiles approvingly. Puffy resists the sudden urge to glare. It's a perfectly *normal* thing for a skater to say, but- honestly, Tommy should take *some* credit where it's given.

Let yourself have at least some of the praise , she thinks.

"Of course," she says, because she must. Because this is live television, not her personal conversation. "Of course, but you completed some pretty tricky moves out there, and if you weren't the one doing them, then they wouldn't be done, now would they?"

A bit preachy and a bit pointed, and she'll probably be told off for it later, but she doesn't really care.

The coach's smile disappears. Now *Puffy* is being glared at. Good. She welcomes his ire.

Tommy flounders a little, caught between the objective truth and the truth that he's been taught to believe. "Um- I- yes? I think so?"

"Yes, and you were wonderful, truly. A delight on the ice." Puffy decides to give him a reprieve. "How do you feel about your performance here tonight? What were your thoughts after that short skate?"

"Relief," Tommy says immediately. So quick that it *had* to be from the soul. It startles Puffy, and the coach, and seems to even startle Tommy himself, because he quickly presses on, as if wanting to talk over himself. "And- and joy. I- there were a few parts that I wish I could've done cleaner, and I still have a lot to work on, but I think- with my coach's guidance- I'll be perfect in no time."

Aren't you already? she thinks, indescribably sad.

When she speaks, she tries not to sound it. "And I have no doubt that you will be," she wished she was allowed to say *anything* else. Anything at all- *I'm here for you, I'm rooting for you. Anything*. The only thing that she can get away with is: "I believe in you, Tommy."

His eyes meet hers, and, call it a wild skater's intuition, but Puffy just knows that he understands.

Punz? Purpled asks. *Can I ask you a question?*

Yeah, kid, what's up?

Do you know Tommy? The figure skater?

Punz hesitates. ...*I do. I know of him, yes.*

Is he- uh- his coach. His coach is very-

Fucked up.

...*Yeah. Pretty much.*

Punz sighs. *Yeah. Why? What happened?*

I don't know, I was coming from the bathroom and they were in the hallway. He was talking to Tommy- well, at Tommy. And he was ...he sounded ...uh, fucked up.

Punz sighs again- longer this time. Louder too. *Yeah. Sports are not always nice to people, Purpled. Not at this level.*

I've never been treated like that.

No. Punz looks at him. There's a beat. *And you won't.*

Oh, Purpled thinks. *Oh.*

...

Purpled sees them again in the hallway as he's coming from the gym.

Tommy's caged in, in almost every way that he can be; eyes down, head down, back to a wall. His coach stands in front of him, leaning down and pointing, speaking harshly but quietly, in a way that makes Purpled's skin tighten all the way over from where he's standing.

He watches for a second, just- unable to look away. It's like a car wreck, or a someone tripping and falling down to the floor. It's awful, and Purpled feels like he *could* do something, but also he feels way too late. Just a few minutes late. Just a few days. Just a few years.

"Alright?" The coach steps back, and Purpled waits for the moment where Tommy breathes. It never comes. "Are you hearing me?" Tommy nods jerkily. "Work on it then. You know words don't mean anything to me. I want to see it."

Tommy nods again and then the coach steps away, walking down the hall the other way. Purpled watches him go, eyes narrowing before finding Tommy again.

Tommy curls his arms around his stomach and hunches over like he can't breathe. He *is*, breathing that is, but it looks awful. It looks like it's coming out in wheezes and pants rather than lungfuls.

The sight of a player struggling to catch their breath is what spurs Purpled to speak.

"Hey," he says. and Tommy snaps up so quickly that Purpled worries for his spine. "Woah, hey man, it's just me."

Tommy looks confused. Worried. "Hi. Sorry, I was- I didn't mean to be-"

"Nah, you didn't do anything," Purpled waves off. He steps closer, careful not to box Tommy in. He sticks out a hand. "I'm Purpled. I curl."

Tommy hesitates, then shakes Purpled's hand. Purpled doesn't mind the chill, or the shake. In fact, he merely tightens his hold the way that Punz does when he meets new athletes. Respect, he thinks. "Tommy. I skate."

"That's cool," Purpled lets go. Tommy's arm curls absently back around his middle. "That wasn't a pun, I promise. I don't make those."

Tommy doesn't laugh, but his eyes squint like he would've smiled there if he hadn't learned not to.

"I saw your coach," he continues, cutting right to it. He's not good at dancing around stuff. Curlers get right to it- hit the heart- they don't flaunt. They don't perform. Purpled knows what he knows and he can't be anything else. "Just a second ago."

"Oh." Tommy says. And that's all. He doesn't offer any information or insight or even an excuse. Just- oh.

"Yeah, that guy seems like a dick."

Tommy looks down the way that he left frantically, like he's waiting for the man to pop out of the shadows. "I'm not- I should really get to-"

"Do you need some help?" Purpled blurts. Hit the heart. Get to the core. Purpled has Punz, maybe Tommy could have Purpled.

Tommy looks even more startled, if that was possible. "Wh- what?"

"Do you need help? With your coach." Purpled explains, pointing down the empty hall. "Because he- I mean, you looked a little scared, Tommy. You seemed- I don't know, I just

think that there are people who can help you if you needed that."

Tommy stares at him for a moment. A long, long moment. And Purpled, though uncomfortable, doesn't look away, doesn't back down, doesn't rescind his offer. He's not gonna turn around and walk away until Tommy tells him to. Punz wouldn't leave him like this, so Purpled won't leave Tommy- simple as that.

He does take the time to study Tommy though; the exhaustion, the drag, the pull. He's got cords around his joints and he's fighting against them with all that he's got. It's more than clear to Purpled that a simple helping hand could even the pull, but Tommy, after his long, long moment, just shakes his head.

"No thank you," he says quietly. "Everything is fine. Thank you for asking."

...

"Why don't people just go get help when they need it?" Purpled asks later, watching Punz roll a broom between his hands.

"This about the figure skater?"

"Tommy." Purpled says, because he feels the need to say it. *The figure skater* feels too impersonal for what he saw of Tommy's trembling vulnerabilities today.

"Right, Tommy. well," Punz makes a tired sound, then leans on the broom. He runs his other hand through his hair, the way he does when he's thinking. "I don't know, Purpled. Honestly. I guess- I mean, the most I could say would be that not everyone is so fortunate to see that the help offered won't hurt as bad as it already does."

Purpled frowns. He thinks about that. A lot.

...

He comes to the conclusion that it, and Tommy, don't make much sense.

...

Purpled likes logic.

Curling is about straight lines and angles. It's about pressure and force and momentum. Curling is math and Purpled is good at it. When you curl, you can't play with emotion, because emotion is unpredictable and can easily spin out of your control.

You handle the broom with quick and precise strokes. You push the rock with an evenly distributed shift and if you're disciplined, you'll get what you need.

Purpled likes math. Purpled likes reason. Purpled likes logic.

Tommy is illogical.

Maybe, in a twisted universe, Purpled could see where the line of reasoning stretches. *Tommy is on the world stage, Tommy is a lone competitor, Tommy is out here with just his coach for support. Tommy doesn't know anyone within miles and miles.* Clearly, there are facts that prevent Tommy from cutting ties with his coach completely.

But-

The fear in Tommy's eyes, which Purpled sat through and waited out, seemed paralyzing. It didn't seem calculated, it didn't seem like he was doing any weighing. It seemed heart stopping and immobilizing. Fear. And fear of the unknown is not something Purpled understands.

Say something, Purpled thinks when he catches the last couple of minutes of Tommy's short skate routine.

Because it's all a fucking car crash, Purpled keeps watching until the scoring. Purpled watches the way Tommy's expression ripples and the way the coach puts an oppressive arm around his shoulder. He watches the way the coach leans in and talks in Tommy's ear, too low for the prying mics to catch.

Punz walks in as Tommy's eyes shutter closed on live television for everyone to see.

"Isn't anyone seeing this?" He asks, and it's weird, because a vast helplessness is bubbling up inside of him. A huge wave of emotion: black and blue and consuming. It all rushes over him. Purpled tries to center himself. He can't. "Isn't anyone-"

Punz steps in between him and the screen. Purpled looks up at his face. The man seems wary. And tired. "Purpled, breathe."

"I'm breathing."

"I think that-"

"It's on national television," he points out, which is dumb, because Punz already knows. But Purpled can only repeat himself. He doesn't know enough words to describe all that's wrong with what he sees. "It's in front of everyone. Why can't anyone just-"

"Purpled, hey man, you gotta breathe."

"-he's the biggest star here. He is the most- he's on national tv!"

"Purpled, please. Take a breath."

"Why do you keep telling me to breathe?" He exclaims, pissed. He can hear the announcers talking still, praising Tommy's score, calling him the darling of the ice, showering him in compliments for correctly concealing his pain. "I'm fucking breathing, Punz. I'm breathing."

Punz is quiet. "You're crying."

All of Purpled's awareness snaps away from Tommy and back to himself, and he realizes he *is*. There are tears trailing down his face. Why is he - *fuck* . He swipes at his face, embarrassed.

"Sorry." He says.

"No," Punz sighs. "You care. He's hurting. So you hurt too."

"It doesn't make sense," Purpled says, scrubbing harder. "It doesn't make sense."

"Sometimes," Punz says, reaching out to curl a hand around Purpled's wrist and pull his hand away from his face, "things just don't make sense. Doesn't mean we should stop caring about them though."

Purpled sighs, and then, in a rare show of weakness, he steps forward and presses his head against Punz's chest, tired. Caring is exhausting. Punz waits, then curls an arm around his shoulders. "He'll be okay, Purpled. I promise you. I'm sure of it."

Purpled tries to believe him. He wishes he was the type of person that did that.

...

The next time Purpled catches sight of Tommy is after the closing ceremonies.

He's got his gold medal around his neck- Purpled can see the ribbon peeking out from his pink sweatshirt- but the actual metal is tucked away, like Tommy couldn't care less that it's there. It's a stark contrast to everyone else, wearing their medals with pride. Even purpled himself, who is wearing his silver place with his chin high.

Tommy is having his rare moment to himself, because no doubt he's been mobbed for attention and photos and all sorts of stuff all night. Purpled almost feels guilty for the way he trails over, wanting to catch his eye, catch his gaze and say something. What, he has no clue, just- *something*.

Then Tommy looks up from his phone and locks eyes with Purpled. He looks surprised. His eyes do the thing- curving like a smile would come- and he opens his mouth like he's about to speak, when someone *else* calls his name.

"Tommy!" Tommy looks over to the hall where a hockey player comes barreling around the corner, hopping with excitement, beanie just barely staying in place over his chin length black hair. "Tommy, they're offering free refreshments- they've got like- cool shit. Like, really cool shit on this long table-"

More of them appear out of thin air, all filtering around Tommy, trying to get his attention to explain what types of food they've got at this table. It's interesting; the way they surround him, it's *easy*. They just curve around him, like they're covering him. Hiding him.

Purpled even catches a glimpse of Tommy *smiling* at them. His eyes curve and lips stretch and eyes glint. He's content with this. And they are too. In fact, Tommy steps one way and

they part, and then come back around him like he's pulling them. Like he's their northern pole.

"Come on," one says, the one with black hair pulled back into two buns on his head all tucked behind an orange headband. He throws an arm around Tommy's shoulders. "Let's get you something to eat, you've been waving at people all night- you deserve pizza!"

For a horrible second, Purpled doesn't see Tommy relax, and thinks, *fuck, there he goes, forever destined to be trapped*, but then Tommy eases, tucking himself even further in under the arm like he knows that's where he should be. Like he knows that's where he's wanted.

Good, Purpled thinks, relief almost knocking him to his knees. He found his help. Good.

Tommy looks over just as he's leaving and waves- a small, shy thing, but something nonetheless. Purpled waves back, happy to watch him go.

Ponk's whole job is taking care of athletes. That's why he's here. So when a blond kid with his head down comes around the corner nervously, like he doesn't know if he's supposed to be here, all of Ponk's internal alarms start going off.

Tommy.

The blond kid is Tommy. Ponk almost couldn't tell since he's all by himself, without George at his back, but no. That's him alright.

"Hey," he says, swiveling from one desk to the other in his rolling chair, pretending not to notice the way Tommy's eyes track him. "Tommy, right? Haven't seen you around here in a bit- is everything going alright?"

Tommy licks his lips. Hesitates. Clears his throat. It doesn't really matter because when he speaks he still sounds like he hasn't opened his mouth in *days*. "Um. Yes. Tommy. Everything is ... fine."

Ponk seriously, seriously doubts that.

Something about those bags under Tommy's eyes isn't *fine*. He remembers when Tommy trailed after George to come in here- he remembers how astonished the boy was at having some space and time to rest. He remembers the coach that came looking for Tommy not ten minutes later- there is nothing about that that could possibly be *fine*.

"Alright!" he says anyway, with a relaxed smile on his face. "Is there anything that I can help you with, then? Are you hurt or is there something bothering you?"

Tommy folds his hands together in front of him. "No," he says, so quickly it must be instinctual, then he winces. "I mean, yes. I- I think?"

"Okay," Ponk says patiently. "Take your time, Tommy. I'm in no rush."

It seems that Tommy is in one though- maybe a race to get what he needs before his coach comes looking for him again.

"My head has been-uh- hurting a little. And it's not bad, I can handle it, I mean, I don't even know why I came down here because it's just a headache so-"

"You came down here because you needed help," Ponk says, a bit firm, stopping Tommy before he can back himself out of the room completely. "And I am the one who will help you. That's perfectly fine- good, even. Stay here, okay, I'll be right back."

Ponk leaves, going into the stock room and opening the cabinet with the ibuprofen in it. He's technically not supposed to give out medicine to players who don't have proper documentation for it, but if Ponk has met Tommy's coach, he's more than willing to bet that man would not sign off for Tommy to receive help that he needs.

The thought makes him burn, so he takes a pause, takes a deep breath, and then goes back out when he's calmer.

Tommy is still standing exactly where Ponk left him, and something about watching him from the doorway looks so incredibly lonesome. He's just standing, but he's standing alone, and it makes Ponk feel awful.

"Here you are," he says, holding out the paper cup with the two green pills in it and a small bottle of water. Tommy takes it curiously. "Just take those with the water and you shouldn't feel any pain in about ten minutes."

"Thank you," Tommy says, sounding entirely too grateful for someone receiving mild pain relieving medication.

"Of course. Have you had enough water today? Have you eaten?"

Tommy nods. The medicine and the water disappears quick enough that Ponk doubts whether that's the truth. "What about sleep? Are you sleeping well?"

Tommy tenses - ah. There it is.

"You should be getting six to eight hours a night, Tommy," Ponk chides gently, trying to think whether or not giving out melatonin tablets would be enough to get him sued and fired.

Tommy's head lowers a little, ashamed. "I know, sorry, I just-" he stops.

"Just what?"

Tommy looks up and Ponk is horrified to see the tears in his eyes. "I can't sleep. I'm sorry."

Ponk feels as if he's been punched in the gut.

"You- you don't have to say sorry, Tommy. That's - it's not your fault." He insists. He wracks his brain, trying to think. The sight of tears is making him panic. "You came here once

before, when you were tired. Why not do that again? George brought you and you slept well, right?"

Tommy only wilts further. "We're not speaking."

Ponk blinks. "You're- I'm sorry?" but Tommy doesn't seem to be keen on filling in the blanks, so Ponk has to carry on. "Okay. Alright. That's okay, Tommy. You can still come here to rest, George or not, you know that right?"

He offers a slow, small nod.

"Good," Ponk steps back, "now let me see if I've got any blankets or anything back here, okay? I'll be right back."

Ponk heads into the back, ducks down to search through the cabinets.

He'll have to do laundry after this, but it's worth it if Tommy would stop suffering from headaches because he can't sleep. He pulls out the folded blanket and another that he could probably use as a pillow, but when he steps back into the room, Tommy isn't there.

The cup, now empty, sits on the counter, along with the half finished bottle of water.

Fuck, Ponk thinks. Fuck.

...

The end of the olympics is Ponk's busiest.

All the athletes who've been running on adrenaline and the high of competition finally crash and realize they've got aches and pains that need ice packs or scratches that need bandaging, or any of the more serious injuries that come from pushes during the final days of tournament.

He gets the briefest of reprieve in dealing with rolled ankles and strained knees and of course, that's when a head of familiar golden hair peeks around the corner.

Ponk's stomach drops.

His first thought is *thank God*. Ponk hasn't seen Tommy since the kid left after his headache. Since he said *me and George aren't talking* and was so tired that he *cried*. Ponk hasn't stopped thinking about him since- wondering whether he was resting, wondering whether he was eating, wondering whether he was performing still.

Sleep deprivation is a silent killer for an athlete. The physical feats they perform could immediately become dangerous if even a split second of focus is lost. Slower reaction time and memory issues and less strength. Any of these- all of these- can throw a figure skater off.

Ponk couldn't stop thinking of Tommy, skating, speeding around the rink during practice, and his focus flickering for just a moment, his eyes shutting for just a beat too long, and another

skater knocking into him. He couldn't stop thinking of Tommy, trying for a jump, but not having the energy to turn all the revolutions in the air. He couldn't stop thinking of Tommy, sprawled on the ice, breathing labored and no one coming for him.

So seeing that head of golden hair is a blessing because thank fuck that he's standing, but it's the same type of curse, because if he's here that means he's hurt and fuck- fuck, if he's hurt and nervous to come inside because of Ponk-

Then a man steps around Tommy, also looking inside like he's never been here before. Pink hair tied back, broad shoulders- Technoblade, George's teammate. "Kid, they look mighty busy, maybe we should just-"

"Tommy!" Ponk says, nudging past his co-worker and a guy carrying boxes of medical tape refills. Tommy's eyes widen, and he finally steps in through the doorway. Ponk can't help the way he looks him over, up and down- no limp, no cradling any limbs, no wincing of hidden pain. "Oh, Tommy, is everything alright? Are you-"

"Hi Ponk," Tommy rubs the back of his neck. "I'm okay."

Ponk squints.

"I mean it," Tommy insists. "I- I won gold."

"Okay, but are you alright?" he stresses, and Techno chuckles.

"I like you, Ponk," he remarks and Tommy sighs.

"Techno needs his hand looked at," Tommy huffs. Then he seems to remember himself, because he ducks a bit. "Uh- please. If you could. If you weren't busy."

"Never too busy for you guys," Ponk says, and he's only lying just a little bit. "Come in, let me see it."

They come in, and Ponk sits them down. He pulls gloves on and holds out a hand to let Techno put his in it. Tommy hovers worriedly, almost making Ponk nervous with how tightly he's holding himself.

"Hm," Ponk hums, brushing a light thumb over the bruised knuckles. "Light bruising. There's a slight cut here- it looks as if you've hit someone across the face. Of course, it's none of my business if-"

"Oh, I did," Techno says easily. "Yeah. he deserved it too."

Ponk's gaze climbs up to Techno's smug expression, and then over to Tommy's red cheeks. Well. That's a story that Ponk can't wait to hear in detail.

"It isn't broken, right?" Tommy blurts suddenly, bringing his own hand up to his mouth right after, like he wished he never asked. They both look at him and he hesitates, then goes, "I mean- Tech will still be able to play and- and everything, right?"

"Yes," Ponk lets go and stands, pulling away to one of the mini freezers they have. He pulls out an ice pack and tears off a couple paper towels to wrap it with. "It'll probably ache for a while- I'm assuming that's why you came in the first place- and those bruises and cuts will heal in a few days just fine. So as long as you ice it and don't go hitting anything else for the next week, you'll be alright."

Techno takes the ice pack. "See, Tommy? Everything is alright. I'm fine and you're fine. There's no need to worry."

Tommy doesn't seem convinced. "You shouldn't have done that," he says, voice hushed. "What if- you could still get into trouble. What happens if you get into trouble?"

"Phil won't let that happen."

"But the cameras," Tommy presses. "There are cameras outside of the cafe and- what if they- what if they see that you-"

"That I what?" Techno asks, raising an eyebrow. "That I protected you? I readily welcome any consequences to that, Tommy, because I would do it again. And again. And again."

Tommy's jaw snaps shut. He looks down and away. Ponk waits, following Techno's lead. They wait for Tommy, patient, as people bustle by behind them.

"What if," Tommy starts, "what if you can't play because of it? What if Phil can't keep you safe? What if I'm the reason that your career is ruined?"

Techno sighs, then reaches out with his uninjured hand to touch Tommy's cheek. Tommy, lips pursed, leans into it. "So be it, Tommy."

"You know," Ponk says, and they both look over like they forgot he was there. "If you find a way to get his actions reviewed by the board, all it would take are a few eye-witness testimonies to do him in."

"Eye witness testimonies?"

Ponk nods. "It would help. To make him leave you alone for good, Tommy. You would never have to deal with him." Tommy looks disbelieving. maybe hopeful, but- "and I, for one, would love to be a part of that."

Techno looks over at Tommy. Tommy's shoulder jump up around his ears at the attention.

"How would you feel about that, Tommy?" Techno asks softly. almost so soft that it makes Ponk feel like he's intruding by hearing it. "Hm? How about we go to Phil with it? Would that be something you want?"

Tommy hesitates. And hesitates. And hesitates. Then, finally, nods.

Ponk can't hide his delighted smile in time.

"You got any threes?" Charlie asks.

Connor doesn't even look at his cards. He doesn't even lift his head off the desk. "Go fish."

"You didn't even *look!*"

Connor sighs. The door opens, bumping into Charlie's chair a little as Ted tries to get inside without one, tripping, or two, falling on his face. One might think that those are the same thing, but Ted is a special kind of guy who can fall in different categories of ways and at different speeds- all with varying results. He does nothing halfway, even falling, and Charlie admires him for it.

"Are you guys still playing go fish?" Ted questions, knocking the door closed with his boot. Connor raises his head just in time for Ted to put a coffee in front of him. "Is this the same round from before? I left for coffee thirty minutes ago."

"Charlie is playing with the wrong deck," Connor says, then drinks half the coffee in two gulps. Ted looks at him, horrified.

"I am not," Charlie exclaims. "I keep asking Connor what he's got and he doesn't ever look."

"I've got one joker, three minion uno cards and two Disney princess pictionary question cards. I seriously don't think you thought up the rules to this game before you started playing."

Charlie pouts, but Ted hands him a glazed donut and he brightens again. "Thanks."

"Well worth the thirty minutes," Connor agrees, somehow already done with the coffee. Ted passes him another without asking, and with only a healthy amount of fear.

"Well, yeah, it probably wouldn't have been thirty if I went over in my jacket, but I think I left it in the car. You know how they don't offer parking?"

"I'm filing a complaint about that, by the way," Connor says. "I hate the bus. And public transport in general. And just- people."

"I parked the rental all the way at the mall. And then got halfway here before I realized I was freezing because, as you can guess, no coat." Ted explains, he scoots over in his rolling chair and offers a hand. Charlie and Connor give him the cards and he starts to shuffle them. "So I couldn't fast pass my way to the front of the line."

"Dude, that's like, the only perk of working here," Charlie groans.

"I know, I know, but- and you'll never believe this, but XQC was actually the one being helpful and *Hasan* was the reason for the line."

"Was he trying to hand out political awareness pamphlets with everyone's coffee again?" Connor asks. Ted nods. "I told him to stop doing that, man. He just doesn't listen."

"He was arguing with every person who wouldn't take one too," Ted passes the cards over to Charlie to deal. Charlie does so happily. "When it was my turn, I took it and said *nothing*."

"Smart man," Connor nods, then picks up his cards. He squints. "What game is this again?"

"Operation," Ted says immediately.

"I think it's chutes and ladders."

Connor sighs. "I'm gonna need another coffee."

...

Charlie is supposed to do these mid-morning sweeps all around the halls.

Just make sure that no one is in need of help or looks shifty and is about to do a serious crime, is what Scott Smajor, his boss, told him when he explained it. And *do a serious crime* were the exact words that he used.

Which- Charlie feels like that can be subjective. He personally thinks that eating cereal with anything other than a spoon or attending a comedy club on the first date with someone are *serious crimes*, but Scott might not agree with that judgment. Hence, subjectivity.

Still, Charlie keeps his eyes peeled for shiftiness as he walks all the halls.

He's getting nothing, seeing no one, criminal or otherwise, when he stumbles on someone. He's a hockey player by the look of his jersey, with a snapback on and facial hair, just leaning against the wall casually texting.

"Hey," Charlie says. The guy looks up. "You'd tell me if you were thinking of doing a serious crime, yeah?"

The man blinks. Then, "absolutely fucking not."

Charlie sighs. His job is so hard. "Could you? For me? I'm supposed to stop you."

"Nah," he pushes off the wall, "I think I'm gonna create a bunch of ruckus and maybe start a crime ring. And you won't even get a single notice about it."

"You're evil," Charlie bites back a grin. He sticks his hand out. "I'm Charlie. Security."

"Schlatt," he says, taking the hand and shaking it. "Criminal. Nice to meet you."

...

Schlatt actually never leaves once he comes by.

His two favorite pastimes seem to be hanging out with them in their too-small monitoring room and increasingly worry Charlie with his vast knowledge of crime and crime related things.

"I watch a lot of true crime," Schlatt had shrugged, like that wasn't just the most horrifying confession Charlie's ever heard.

Him and Connor get on like a house on fire, and by the end of *one* day, they've exchanged numbers and are probably, like, gonna go to each other's weddings.

"This is dude-bro behavior," Ted whispers at him as they watch Connor say something to make Schlatt actually *spit* from laughter. Charlie, leaning back in amused disgust, has to agree.

It's fun, actually. Schlatt is fun. And if he wasn't an Olympic hockey player, Charlie has the vague feeling that he would be a stupid old tired security guard just like them.

Charlie shows him his mis-matched card game, and Schlatt takes to it easy, winning even though there are no real rules except for the fact that you *can't* win.

"There we go," Schlatt says. "I'm a winner." He reaches over and snags a piece of Ted's coffee cake. Ted doesn't bother telling him off.

"How did you-" Charlie gapes. He leans in to look closer at the cards. The man has a hello kitty crazy eight, two aces, and a *tarot* card. "This game is literally impossible to win, how are you-"

Schlatt shrugs, grinning. "Got fucking game, man. What can I say?" Then, almost to himself, he adds, "Tommy would love this game."

Charlie looks over to Ted, who shakes his head subtly. They've ignored all the little mentions and name drops of this mysterious *Tommy* who Schlatt always seems to be thinking of. It's as if he's just right there in the back of his mind. As if he's mentally at the man's side and Schlatt simply *must* accommodate for his presence.

At first, they thought he might be a teammate, but the thing is that Schlatt has *talked* about his teammates before, when they asked. He's talked about how Techno is their captain, how Sapnap is an annoying prick, how George is the scariest motherfucker to ever walk planet earth.

He's described a Wilbur and a Quackity and a Phil, but there were no mentions of any Tommy.

Maybe, Charlie thought, Tommy was Schlatt's little brother. Because siblings will do that; an older sibling is *always* an older sibling, they're always thinking in terms of we- always catering to the invisible presence in the room. The way that Schlatt talks about Tommy; absent, but fond, casual, but intimate, is the way that Charlie talks about his sisters.

He'd walk nails for them, and he has the feeling, just based on tone alone, that Schlatt would do the same for Tommy.

So Charlie doesn't want to ask. And Ted doesn't want to ask. But-

"Who's Tommy?" Connor asks, sliding all the cards into his hands and straightening them against the table.

Schlatt hums, questioning, distracted momentarily by his phone. "What?" Connor repeats the question. "Tommy? Oh, he's-"

There's a pause, in which Schlatt searches for words. He doesn't seem to come up with any that do an apt job. "Uh, he's this guy I met here."

"Tommy, Tommy," Charlie repeats, trying to place the name. He doesn't know everyone in all the different departments- there are far too many people- but he hears a lot of names. Even still, he doesn't think he knows a Tommy. "What does he do?"

"Oh, he doesn't work here. He's an athlete."

"Ah," Ted says. "Makes sense that we don't know him. If you couldn't tell by the cards being passed around, we don't actually *do* our jobs."

"I respect that," Schlatt nods. "I really do. Keep it up, fellas."

"What does he do?" Connor asks. "Is he another hockey player?"

Schlatt's expression does something weird here. He kind of winces and sighs and grimaces all at the same time- overall just making him look like he's in physical pain.

"No," he says softly, looking off to the side like he's thinking. "He's not." A quiet moment passes. Then Schlatt looks back and seems to realize that he's being watched. He grins, then goes, "so who's dealing? I'm ready to beat your asses again- and I will, don't tell me that I won't-"

Ted immediately jumps on it, wanting to give Schlatt that reprieve. "Oh yeah, you'll keep winning if all you do is cheat- Connor, pass me those cards, I'm dealing."

They don't ask about Tommy again.

...

They don't actually *have* to ask about Tommy again, because they meet him before he comes up again.

They go to Hasan and X's cafe together, because none of them are really working anyway, and three heads arguing with Hasan about why he should not give out political advice with people's donuts are better than one.

It's just after lunch, so they're not surprised to see it empty, with anyone who wanted something already having gotten it, and people off either practicing or getting ready to. X is wiping down the counter alone when they walk up.

"Where's Hasan?" Connor asks, and X looks up, then rolls his eyes dramatically.

"I'm sorry, is everyone here coming up to this cafe for the- the zoo attraction that is Hasan Abi? Am I- what am I? Hm? Am I some kinda chopped meat?"

"Liver," Ted corrects.

XQC looks offended. "You know, you're not shit either pal, so-"

Connor sighs. "X, either give me a coffee or tell me the location of someone who will. I don't have time for this."

X tilts his nose up, but moves to start making Connor's coffee. "Hasan is over there," he points with his head, nodding over at one of the far tables scattered around the cafe.

From here they can see him, kneeling by the knee of a blond kid. There's a coffee on the table next to him, and a napkin with a pastry on it. If Charlie wasn't crazy, he'd think that Hasan is trying to convince the kid to take the treats.

"Who's that?" Ted frowns. "Is Hasan babysitting or something?"

X hesitates for a moment. Everyone seems to be doing that lately. "That," he sighs, "is Tommy. Now take this coffee and get the fuck away from me."

...

Charlie, unironically, had no idea that Hasan could speak softly. Truly, he thought the man only had one volume setting- yelling or ranting- both loudly. But, as they all walk over, Connor with his coffee and Ted with a cherry danish, they hear him talking, gentle and slow.

"- you don't have to, obviously, but maybe it would be good if you just told someone. Scott, my boss, he-"

The kid sees them coming and ducks, making Hasan stop. He turns, squaring his shoulders, hiding Tommy behind him like he's ready to...who knows, but then he must realize that it's just them.

"Oh, the idiot brigade." He sighs. "How nice."

Charlie snaps, like *that's me* and Connor blinks slowly. "You're one to talk."

Hasan opens his mouth but Ted jumps in before Tommy could actually disappear into the seats and Hasan could get so heated that they start arguing and forget about him. "Hey, who's this?"

Hasan turns a bit, letting them see Tommy better. Tommy straightens, tense. "Hello."

The way that his tone is so flat sets Charlie off slightly. His sister sounds like that when she's upset and trying not to be, or sometimes Connor will come into work sounding like that and they'll know it's a *bad day*.

Dull and unaffected; sort of like nothing.

"Hey, I'm Charlie," he says, sticking out a hand. Tommy stares at it, then takes it carefully. His hands shake, and they're cold, but Charlie tries not to think about it. Everyone has their quirks. Sometimes Charlie has days when he can't focus on one thing for longer than five minutes, sometimes Ted's hands twitch and he just needs to right the collar of their jackets or check the logs to make sure they're all in order even though they already have. Everyone's got something. "Is that a cinnamon roll?"

Tommy looks over at the treat next to him like he didn't even register it was there. "Oh, um. I think so."

"*Dude*," Charlie sinks into the seat next to Tommy. "Those things fuck so hard."

Tommy's eyes widen. "I- *sorry*? They- they what?"

"PG thirteen, please," Ted says, sitting down across from Charlie. "Don't worry about it, Tommy, this guy needs severe help."

"You should eat it, is what I *mean*," Charlie says. "They're really good when they're warm."

Hasan takes his silent cue and nudges the plate closer to Tommy. Tommy takes it gingerly. "Thank you," he says softly. "Thank you, um-"

"I'm Ted, the anti-social fucker over there is Connor. We came to save you from Hasan's evil clutches."

Connor salutes and Hasan sighs. "You know, I'd kick these guys out if they weren't already security."

For some reason, Tommy, who had been relaxing slowly but surely, suddenly tenses back up. "Security?"

"Yeah," Hasan nods. "these would probably be the goons that you would talk to if you needed help."

"Help?" Charlie frowns. "Help with what?"

Hasan opens his mouth, but Tommy interrupts, saying *nothing!* all super quick and sudden and then, to top it off, he rips off a piece of cinnamon roll and shoves it into his mouth.

They all watch him, stunned.

Tommy flushes, then stands on shaky legs. "I should go. I mean, um- thank you. For the cinnamon roll. And- it was nice to meet you all. But I need to- I've got to go."

"Hey," Connor says, finally speaking up. Tommy stops. Slowly, Connor reaches over and picks up the coffee on the table. "Don't forget this, man. You look a little tired."

Charlie watches him reach out to take it with his shaking hand. The sight, for some reason he can't define, overwhelms him with sadness.

"Thank you," he whispers, and then he leaves.

...

That's Tommy, Hasan reports later, we hardly see him unless he's coming out from there. Hasan points to the other end of the hall where the stairwell to the rinks leads.

And, XQC adds, we don't see him unless he looks ready to pass out. I dunno what that's about but- you know, we can give away some of the coffee we've got. Hasan keeps saying making money is bad or-

Capitalism. Hasan sighs. Just- stop. Be quiet. X bristles, but Hasan keeps talking. He's friends with the hockey players, but - I don't know. I don't know how much they know. I don't know how much I know. The only one who knows everything is Tommy.

And he's not talking, Connor says.

And he's not talking. Hasan agrees. He sighs. Leans back in his chair. I want him to, but- if he doesn't... I hope that someone talks for him. I hope he finds his help.

...

When Schlatt stops coming by for a bit, they don't mind it. Charlie deals cards for three and any of the extra coffees Ted gets just go to Connor.

It's fine, Charlie thinks. What could possibly be going wrong at the Olympics?

...

There's a knock at their office door only two days later.

It can't be Schlatt, because he never knocks, he just barges his way in, uncaring of who is in his way.

Charlie goes to open it, and there stands Phil, Schlatt's coach.

"Hello," Charlie greets, "uh- if you're looking for Schlatt, he's not here right now."

"I know," he says. "I'm actually looking for you three."

Charlie looks over at Ted, who looks equally confused, but nods, so Charlie steps back to let him in.

"I'm really sorry to get in the way of your day," Phil starts, "but I need to take a chance and ask for you guys to do a huge favor for me. And I need you to keep it quiet."

"What kind of favor?" Connor frowns, sounding wary. Charlie will admit to it too- he's not going to be erasing camera footage or changing keycard logs if he doesn't know *why* he's doing it.

"If you can," Phil couches, "if it's even possible, I need any video footage, audio or logs that you have on Tom Simons."

"Why?" Charlie asks.

And, even though Phil is clearly trying to keep this information as need-to-know as he can, he looks right at Charlie and says, "because I want him safe. And because his coach deserves to burn."

Charlie...doesn't quite know how to respond to that.

Thankfully, Ted saves him, leaning back in his chair and going, "well, we'll have to see if that's even possible- we do have rules to follow, after all."

Phil's expression dims a little, but he nods. "Of course. Yeah, I shouldn't have- of course. Your job is your priority, I understand. All I ask is that you please try. Please. If not for me, then for him."

And then he leaves, offering nothing more to help them to understand.

Connor is the first one to speak. "What the hell was that, Ted? We have *rules* to follow? Since when do we follow rules?"

"Okay, I know, I know, I just wanted us to be able to decide for ourselves," Ted rolls his chair over, turning the computer monitor on. "If we watch the footage that he wants, then we can decide whether or not we should hand it over. Something is going on with that kid, and to be honest, I'm tired of trying to ignore it."

So, that's that. They all crowd around the one single monitor to watch Ted click through time stamps all the way back up to the first time Tommy walks in through the doors of the facility.

To be honest, the first couple logs aren't that bad.

For the first few days at the village, Tommy is quiet and clearly not happy; he goes to his room, he comes out, he goes to the dance studio, he comes out, he goes to the ice rink. He talks with his coach in the hallways and they have a lunch in which Tommy just picks at his food uncomfortably, not talking, but nothing else is unusual about it all.

Then, one of the videos has Tommy stumbling into view of the ice rink hallway camera looking ill. He lurches towards the bathroom, and he seems on the verge of tears.

After that, it only gets worse.

They flip up the audio, and suddenly, there's a comment here, and the coach is degrading Tommy over there. And then Tommy goes into practice and doesn't come out in time before that camera's tape needs to be changed over and they have to click out and get to the next video.

It goes on. And on. And on.

"Good God," Ted whispers, sounding ill. When Charlie looks over he can't see very well through the tears in his eyes and Connor's hands are balled in his lap- all quiet, boiling anger.

"Look for the rink video. During Tommy's practice times." And neither of them want to, but Connor adds, "please."

They can't not.

Ted finds the rink videos. Charlie didn't think it could get worse, but of course, it does.

Suddenly, Charlie understands it all. He understands why Tommy speaks so dully, why he holds himself like he's being constantly scrutinized, why he doesn't lift his head to meet other's eyes. Suddenly he understands why Schlatt says Tommy's name like it's a ruined prayer, or why Hasan manages to speak in the rarest of soft tones to him, or why Phil came to their door, looking like a man who's resorted to his last stakes.

Suddenly, Charlie and Ted and Connor, the three of them, security guards who took this job as a joke and have never actually *worked*, know the details of Tommy's biggest secret. Of the Olympics' biggest secret.

Suddenly they have all the answers that they wanted to the questions that they didn't ask- why is Tommy so quiet? Why doesn't he laugh freely? Why is it that he's only seventeen but seems so much older?

But also, now Charlie finds himself with a million more questions: How long has this been going on- just here? From before the Olympics? How far back? What kind of twist of fate could find them at the heart of all of this?

But the most important question:

"Fuck," Charlie says, voice wavering something awful. "Where were we?"

Ted looks over at him, pausing the video. "What?"

"This- this is our job, isn't it?" Charlie asks, gesturing to the screen, where the still picture of Tommy cowering away from his coach is. At his side, Connor swallows thickly. "We're supposed to deal with stuff like this. We're supposed to keep people safe. We're supposed to fucking- *keep watch*."

And that seems to get to them- with Ted's eyes glossing over and Connor standing abruptly, jerking to start pacing nervously.

"Fuck," Connor whispers. " *Fuck*. All the damn card games and coffees and days we just fucking *complained* about having to show up. We complained about working- there was a kid here who needed us. He *needed* us. And we- where the fuck were we?"

There's a quiet, tense moment, and then Ted goes, "needs."

"What?" Charlie snuffles.

"Needs." Ted repeats, just a little louder. "Not needed. Needs. Tommy needs us. He needs our help *now*. We- maybe we won't be able to make up for what we've missed, but we can certainly fucking try."

"We're giving Phil the footage," Connor fills in. Ted nods. "Alright. Okay- let me go call him back down here. I'm gonna-" He leaves quickly, fumbling for his phone, and Ted takes a loud breath. He notices Charlie just sitting, and turns in his chair to face him.

"Hey." Ted says.

"Hi," Charlie manages.

"Are you alright?" Then Ted winces. "Stupid question- sorry, I mean, like-"

Charlie shakes his head. He swipes a hand across his nose. "No. We failed him, Ted. We didn't- we weren't there. If that was one of my sisters-"

Ted reaches out and puts two hands on Charlie's shoulders. He holds on tight. "Charlie, we're gonna set this right, okay? Together."

Charlie blinks rapidly, then nods. "Together," he repeats.

...

They give Phil the footage.

After that, it takes no time at all for everything to change; the coach is reviewed, he's banned from coaching minors at a professional level, and there are eye-witness testimonies from all over the competition.

"I don't want to hear about it," Tommy says after he knocks on their little office door on the very last day of the Olympics. "I don't- I mean, I lived it. And everyone is going to go and say something, so- um- can I stay with you guys? Please?"

Ted softens. "Of course, Tommy."

But they don't make him stay in their office. They head down to the cafe, which is closing up early because everyone is leaving- but, as if it's eternal- XQC and Hasan are in there, arguing back and forth while they pack up cups and coffee grounds.

"Hey," Ted says, knocking on the counter to get their attention. "Got coffee for four more?"

XQC opens his mouth, probably to snap at him, but then his eyes catch on Tommy a little bit behind him. He stops, and his expression turns gentle.

"Yeah, what can I get you?"

They order themselves coffee and Tommy gets a cinnamon roll and Connor pulls the chairs down from one of the tables so they can sit.

"I brought cards," Charlie offers, and Tommy looks interested, so he deals them out.

They can do this, Charlie thinks. They can be a place for Tommy to come to get away when things get too serious.

And Schlatt was right, Tommy *does* enjoy the game.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

"But this means that he'll be on the search," she continues. "He'll be looking to compete in the next Olympics and he'll need someone as strong and skilled as he is to lead him."

"Hey, I'd come out of retirement if Tommy asked," Sam jokes.

"Oh, you and seventy other people." Puffy rolls her eyes. "Everyone is raving, trying to determine who it could possibly be. Who is good enough for Tom Simons? Who can be trusted with his talent and with his heart?"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

And suppose tenderness is only a small thing

you could give, simple as a peppermint.

Would you wake with the dread you've felt for years?

Or would you remember to feed the lilies

because you're human and they are alive?

The practice sheet sign up times were always dominated by Tommy's coach, Hannah says. There wasn't a time that he didn't have the rink reserved in order to work Tommy over. And, trust me, Tommy would spend every single second of that time on the ice. I saw only one practice, by accident, because I was trying to find my way around, but- I mean, it was constant work. Not a single break. He made Tommy move like a machine.

...

I never saw any of the skates, Foolish starts, I'm not really- I don't get ice skating? I'm more of a luge man. But you'd have to be insane to not hear the way they'd talk to each other. Or- well, I say they, but I really mean he. The way that the coach talked to Tommy. It was nonstop criticism. On things that I don't even think have to do with skating! Eating and clothing and the way he would move; I mean, it should say a lot that I know all of that and have only ever overheard one conversation between the two! No, that dude is seriously not good.

...

Tommy came to me once, George says, asking for a place to nap. He needed somewhere safe to rest. That is all I'm going to say because that is all that I needed to hear to want to kill that man.

...

Tom's coach was bad even when we were kids. Eryn reports. Didn't let him have breaks, didn't let him prioritize school, didn't let ... didn't let him have friends. Everything only blew up at the Olympics. It just got worse.

...

To walk out of the rinks you've got to pass the cafe that I work at, Hasan explains. There's no way to get around it or to avoid it, you have to go straight through the hall. So, it should say something that all the times that I've seen Tommy haven't been sitting at the tables and having a drink or whatever, but walking back and forth from the rooms to the rinks. Back and forth, back and forth. Sometimes multiple times a day. I mean, check the rink logs if you want- it's all there.

...

When a kid comes to you in tears because he's so tired, Ponk huffs, that's when it all becomes rather personal. My job is to take care of athletes. My job is to take care of people. As long as that coach has access to Tommy, my job is incomplete. Let me do my job.

...

I actually had a conversation with Tommy once, Purpled says. It wasn't long. I just asked him, do you need help? And the pause before he said no told me everything that I needed to know. I don't know how anyone hasn't helped before now. I don't know why I couldn't help back then. But you can. So help him.

...

I am, quite frankly, appalled that any of this could happen under my watch at my event, Scott says. I pride myself on running a top-notch, perfectly clean Olympics. Letting him continue to coach Tommy when he's clearly done irreconcilable damage on this child would be a shame, and if the committee won't recognize that, then I'll have no choice but to step down and find a new place of employment.

...

We've listened to your testimonials, Kristin reads, and we have determined that this coach will be stripped of any awards and prizes given by the Olympic committee and he will be barred from coaching minors on the international level for as long as he lives. Thank you everyone who came to speak on Tommy's behalf and to all the others who cared for him when he slipped under our radars. Thank you.

"So," Sam says, "big figure skating news today!"

"Oh, yes," Puffy nods, even though the listeners can't see her. "Huge. It's rocking the skating world. Tom Simons, the world's youngest Olympic figure skater, is currently without a coach."

"Thank god," Sam tosses out and Puffy hums her agreement.

"But this means that he'll be on the search," she continues. "He'll be looking to compete in the next Olympics and he'll need someone as strong and skilled as he is to lead him."

"Hey, I'd come out of retirement if Tommy asked," Sam jokes.

"Oh, you and seventy other people." Puffy rolls her eyes. "Everyone is raving, trying to determine who it could possibly be. Who is good enough for Tom Simons? Who can be trusted with his talent and with his heart?"

Eret, contrary to popular belief, never actually retired.

Not officially. After he won gold he went overseas, skated, choreographed, studied. The people all said whatever they were going to say- that he left because he was afraid that he wouldn't be able to pull the next gold, that he left because he knew he didn't deserve the gold he won, that he left because he never truly cared about the sport. All sorts of things. Everyone always has something to say.

In reality, Eret stopped loving the sport he dedicated most of his life too. He had forgotten why he started, and so he went overseas to remember.

While he was over there, he avoided the figure skating world. He didn't want to hear the reports, he didn't want to see the stats, he didn't want to sully his attempts at learning to love again.

But, he slipped up. He wanted to see one. Just one. The Olympics were happening and Eret couldn't help himself.

He only saw *one* program. Just one. The music was perfect, the skater was bright eyed and chipper and charming and bursting with the fresh beginnings of love.

An olympic gold free skate, the commentators reported after it was over. Good old Sam. Kind-hearted Puffy. Eret loves them- Eret misses them. *Tom Simons*, they say, *youngest skater to win in a long, long while. And with a smile like the sun to boot.*

He's in need of a coach, Puffy reports, and Eret feels like she's talking directly to him. Just like all of those calls that she made when Eret told the two of them that he was leaving; Sam understood, letting him go, but Puffy was persistent- calling and calling until she stopped.

Now, she's doing it again, even if she doesn't know it. She, with this, is saying *yes, this is your door back into the sport you loved. Come home and guide this lovely wreckage.*

Eret turn off the television and gets up to pack his bags.

...

"Hi," Eret greets, sticking out a hand. "I'm Eret. I'm so excited to work with you."

Tommy takes it carefully. Shakes it once. "Tommy. I feel the same."

Eret knows he doesn't mean it- not yet. But that's okay. Everything starts somewhere. This will be the start of them.

...

Eret doesn't have an open-door or a closed-practice policy. He's never thought of it before; never thought that his practices would be something that he should need to filter. He's got nothing to hide about his methods, so if people who aren't skating show up, then so be it.

But it does surprise him slightly when, on his first practice with Tommy, he walks into the rink and there is a *whole* Olympic gold medal winning team of hockey players sitting there waiting. They're talking amongst themselves, but when Eret strolls in, they all quiet down to watch him.

Tommy is already on the ice, completely ready, skating in warm up circles, which is weird, because Eret didn't tell him to do that yet. Eret actually wasn't expecting Tommy to *be* here, considering it's still a half an hour until their actual practice time. Eret wanted to come early to talk to the rink manager, check on the payments- he wasn't expecting *this*.

Tommy notices him and stops skating immediately. He straightens, almost like a soldier, and then locks eyes with Eret before deciding better of it and looking down at his feet.

"Good morning," he says, tone carefully measured. "What would you like me to do first?"

Wow. Eret knew it was bad, he heard the testimonies, he's talked to Puffy and Sam on three-way call once he landed, but this is-

Well, Eret thinks. He's scrapping all of his original plans. They've got some rebuilding to do- starting at the base and working their way up. Foundation first.

"Morning!" He says cheerily. "Gosh, you got here early- I feel like I'm running late." He laughs, but Tommy looks stricken- Eret catches him glancing over at the stands in a panic.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I didn't mean to-"

"Oh no, don't say sorry. Come here, come off the ice," Eret interrupts, waving his hand easily. "You don't have to be warmed up thirty minutes before, Tommy, I honestly came so early just to talk to the rink manager."

Tommy slides forward, confused. "Oh. You mean- how early should I come?"

"Ten minutes is fine by me," Eret says. "Of course, I've rented an hour earlier than our actual time and a half an hour later just in case you want to come early or stay later and skate for yourself, but that's all up to you."

Tommy looks wary, so Eret leans in closer and puts his hands over Tommy's on the rink edge. He makes sure to lock eyes with the boy- he wants this to sink in. "I mean it- this isn't a challenge or a test. If you want to skate earlier or later, it will always be your own choice. That time is yours. Our practice time is ours."

"Ours?"

"We share it," he says simply. "It's the both of us working, so it's ours."

Tommy looks stunned. Eret pulls back to let him process.

"You can come off the ice, though. And take off your skates, I'll be right back so we can start." Eret says. "Is that alright, Tommy?"

Tommy nods jerkily, and Eret leaves him.

...

[Later](#), Eret sits Tommy down on the bleachers and explains.

He just wants to talk for this first practice. That's all- he wants them to talk and clear up any misunderstandings before they occur so that when they *do* get on the ice, there aren't any unaligned expectations. Because if Tommy expects certain things from Eret and Eret expects different things from Tommy, then this will never work.

And Eret really wants this to work.

"I want there to be a clear line of dialogue between us, always," he says. "I will never speak to you in subtext or use codes or expect you to do something if I haven't stated it directly, does that make sense?"

Tommy nods carefully, listening intently.

"Okay, good." he praises. "So when I say it's up to you, it's really up to you. I don't want you to consider what I would want at all when you make your own decisions. Okay?"

"Okay," Tommy says. "yeah, okay."

"Good." Eret's gaze drifts over to the hockey players that are sitting only a little bit away, pretending not to listen in. He makes a mental note to learn their names. If he wants to stay around, he bets they'll be staying around too. "And about the door policy-"

"Sorry," Tommy rushes, when Eret looks back over, he's red faced and worried, almost stumbling over himself to explain. "Sorry, I tried to tell them that most practices are closed and that they shouldn't come, but they wanted to-"

"-Make sure you'd be safe," Eret finishes. Tommy's mouth closes. His eyes drop to his own hands, as if ashamed. "That's perfectly alright."

Tommy looks back up, eyes wide. "You- what?"

Eret smiles. "I think that it's sweet, you know. Having people that care so much to want you safe. And they should. You have people who are willing to walk with you, I would never stop that."

"But- but friends are a distraction."

"I mean, they can be. When you're trying to learn how to do a jump and they can't stop making you laugh, maybe," he says.

He can't help thinking of Puffy. He can't help thinking of Sam. Any time that he was able to get on the ice with the both of them, they never got a single thing done, but those were the practices that Eret remembers the most. The feeling of hurting from laughter stayed with him, even today. *That's* the feeling he's chasing as he relearns this sport.

"But most of the time, friends are supportive, and nothing can go wrong with having more support."

"You won't mind if they come?" Tommy asks.

"Not at all. If they make you feel safe, then they can come to all the practices. Whatever you need, Tommy."

Eret isn't surprised in the slightest when Tommy tears up. Tommy seems mortified with himself, but Eret just smiles patiently, waiting it out. *You're alright*, he wants to say, *Everything is alright*, but that could overwhelm Tommy, so he keeps quiet and waits.

When Tommy gets himself under control, Eret brings up the other point that he wanted to mention. He made sure, when he was making a list of things that he wanted to reiterate, that this one was underlined and starred.

"Tommy," he goes, quite serious, "I need you to know something." Tommy leans in a little, not looking wary anymore, which Eret silently cheers at. "If I ever tell you to do something, and you don't feel comfortable, you can always, *always* tell me and I will listen to you. Or, if you don't feel comfortable, I beg that you tell someone else, so they can let me know. I'll never be upset or angry that you are setting your own limits, okay? My main priority is your health and wellness, not gold. Does that make sense?"

And this time when Tommy bursts into tears, Eret pulls him into a gentle, careful, soothing hug, letting the boy sob into his chest.

...

Eret doesn't do this often, but he gives Tommy homework.

I want you to go home and write down anything that you have ever wanted to do at an ice skating practice- any type of move, or a song you've always wanted to dance to, or people you've wanted to skate with- anything. It doesn't have to be Olympic level training; if you've wanted to try it, then it's valid. If you've wanted to give it a shot, then it's worth considering.

The next practice, Tommy comes in with his perfectly folded piece of paper and hands it over with shaking hands. Eret sees some quads, some songs that he wants to do choreography to, sees *practice with other skaters*, and some specific moves like a split falling leaves or the hydroblade- which was Eret's signature, and fills him with excitement to read. And then, there's one more thing written all the way at the bottom of the list.

Tag on the ice.

It's been crossed out and re-written like Tommy was scared to put it there, and Eret doesn't have to even guess as to why. It would be so easy to call that request childish, to dismiss Tommy for wanting to *play*, and the thought that anyone would makes Eret feel physically ill.

"Thank you," Eret says, tone gentle. "And tag- that sounds like fun. I can't wait to play with you, Tommy."

Tommy's head ducks, all red, but Eret catches sight of the smallest relieved smile, and smiles himself.

At some point after middle school, Tommy stopped enjoying going to ice skating practice.

It just- it started feeling like work. It started feeling like a task. As if, after school, there was just more school, except colder and way more tiring. He clocked that it was bad at one point towards the end of his freshman year, when he had to show up a few minutes late to practice because he had a panic attack on the school bathroom floor.

That was the day his coach implemented the thirty minutes early rule. After that, Tommy didn't have any more panic attacks- not because he wasn't panicking, but because he didn't have the time.

He left practice thinking about the next time he would have to go back, and he went to bed, not anxious about the test the next day, but the jump passes he would have to make in front of his coach during their two hour time.

He wanted to stop. He couldn't stop.

He would show up and he would be expected to be on the ice and warmed up before his coach got there so not to waste any time. He was expected to do everything he was told, and if he didn't get something, he was expected to be prepared to do it again and again until he did. He never got a say, he never got a break, and he was expected to be grateful for that.

That was his life, and he didn't have any other point of reference, so he didn't question it.

...

"Okay," Eret says, not yelling, but voice carrying easily over the rink. "Here's how it'll work-"

Tommy, at his side, does his best to keep still and not jitter about, but he *can't*. He desperately wants to move, he desperately wants to shake. And not even in fear. It's been a while since he's felt this; something stomach clenching, finger curling, bubbling up inside of him. Excitement. Anticipation that isn't steeped in fear.

He feels almost drunk on it: glee. God, it feels so nice.

"-if you end up tagged three times, you're out until the end of the round, and until we start again. Who wants to be it first?"

Immediately, George's hand goes up, to the surprise of no one.

Eret asked him who he wanted around for his game of tag and Tommy immediately knew. His *friends*. The hockey players who saved him, the other hockey players who helped him grow. Tubbo and Ranboo and Eryn and Beau and Aimsey, all people that Tommy never thought he'd have ever. He only wanted them for this, and they all showed up.

"Alright," Eret chuckles, "George is it."

Schlatt pales.

George gives a feral grin that makes delightful fear spike in Tommy's gut. "Five second head start- you all better run."

Wilbur skates over, non-plussed about the havoc that George was planning to wreak. He tangles their hands together clumsily. "You ready, sunshine?"

"Yes," he whispers, too excited to shout. Too giddy to say anything more. He feels like he's gonna cry from happiness. And having Wilbur and Techno here with him, Schlatt and George and Quackity, only makes the feeling that much sweeter. "Yes, I'm ready."

"Let's go then," Wilbur laughs, pulling him away.

George, for the first three minutes, is dead-set determined on getting Schlatt. He just chases Schlatt around and around the rink until the man concedes, but that makes the game no less fun. Tommy skates around laughing at the way Tubbo slips and slides, and the way that Rae drifts teasingly close to George before slipping away out of reach.

The first person down is Techno, who tried to give Schlatt a reprieve from running in terror, followed closely by QT, and then Schlatt. Sapnap slips and falls and gets tagged out, and then so does Quackity, but only because he's so busy laughing at Sapnap's stumble. Poki is next, and then Tubbo, then Tina, and Wilbur ends up sacrificing himself for Tommy, who just barely gets away from George's evil claws.

As he rounds the rink, he realizes Eret is still in, skating backwards, eyes bright and cheeks red as he out-maneuvers George like it's nothing. Tommy is mesmerized by the sight of his coach- and *wow*, how nice is it to be able to think that without the fear that clings- having a good time playing around.

By the end, Rae is caught because she forgets the game and tries to tackle George to assert dominance over him, and then it's just Eret and Tommy left to run.

"I'm *coming!*" George says, building speed to run right at Tommy, but Eret slides in between the two of them, putting his back to Tommy and throwing his arms out wide.

"You're not getting him!" he exclaims playfully, and it's fun, but Tommy can't help the way that sinks into his skin. *You're not getting him.* He feels it all sink in the feeling of finally being safe behind someone who he can trust.

Eret is on the ice with him, giving him what he asks for, making him bubbly with happiness, and standing in front of him, even if it's playfully, protecting him.

Suddenly, Tommy realizes that he's excited for the future. He's excited to have to go to practice tomorrow, he's excited to have to train and learn the things that Eret has to teach him.

He's not even off the ice yet, but he's already eagerly anticipating the next time he'll be able to lace up his skates.

"Run Tommy!" Eret exclaims. "Skate away!"

Tommy spins and ducks from under Eret's arm, unable to stop peals of laughter that escape him as George gives chase.

He could do this forever, he thinks, catching sight of Eret out of the corner of his eye. He *wants* to do this forever.

...

Can we go to breakfast, Tommy asks, and it's nerve-wracking, because Tommy never actually asked his old coach to hang out, knowing he'd be denied and sent to the ice, but Eret is different. Eret just smiles.

I'd love that, Tommy. A team breakfast, he says, and Tommy's stomach flutters; that thrilling glee again.

Him and Eret: a team. Equals working together. Tommy wants to cry.

They go early in the morning to a diner for pancakes, and since it's a little while away, it's a nice drive up. Eret rolls down the windows and plays music that Tommy's never heard before, and the sun is up and the breeze is nice, and Tommy wants to close his eyes and tip his head back and just be.

They go inside, with Tommy humming a bit that got stuck in his head and Eret chuckling fondly at him.

What can I order? Tommy asks, just to cover his bases. Of course, Eret just shrugs.

Anything you want.

He gets pancakes and Eret gets French toast and they sit and talk together.

Tommy learns a lot about his coach; he wants a dog, his favorite season is spring, he paints his nails. When Tommy expresses how cool that is, Eret laughs and offers to paint his if he wants- something bright to suit him. Then Eret asks about *him* - Tommy's favorite color, if he's a morning or a night person, what he wants to be when he grows up.

"What do you mean?" Tommy frowns, a bit stumped.

"Well," Eret cuts his French toast into neat triangles, and then quietly offers Tommy one. "You're only seventeen. You've still got a lot of growing up to do. You've got all this time; what do you want to do with it?"

Immediately, Tommy thinks, *figure skating*. Then pauses, considers, and realizes that he actually means it.

"I want to skate," he says slowly. "but I want it to be fun. I want to have fun again."

Eret smiles. "I do too. Maybe we could help each other with that."

Tommy takes a breath, that flood of sudden happiness almost overtaking him. He's going to get used to that feeling, he realizes. Here, with Eret, he's going to learn the ins and outs of joy, and everything that comes with it.

"Yeah," Tommy says, wanting to laugh in astonishment, in breathless gratitude. "Maybe we could."

Chapter End Notes

AND THAT'S THAT!! the song I linked is just the song I listened to while I wrote eret and Tommy's scene and it FEELS like them, so if you want to re-read it with it on, then that's the atmosphere I was going for <3

[but also, all of the songs I've listened to can be found here](#)

the poem is by Jennifer k Sweeney and it's called comfort, if anyone was interested

leave a comment, they make me happy!

End Notes

this is in multiple chapters for no reason other than I like the look of it <3

Works inspired by this one

[Nordlicht \[aurora borealis\]](#) by [snowydayys](#)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!